



*G. Fleetwood
& Clarence Park*

BOUND TO WIN

A TALE OF THE TURF.

BY HAWLEY SMART,

AUTHOR OF "BREEZIE LANGTON;" "A RACE FOR A WIFE;"
"COURTSHIP IN 1720, 1860;" ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:
CHAPMAN & HALL, 193, PICCADILLY.

1877.

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BOUND TO WIN.

CHAPTER I.

FAUST CONSULTS MEPHISTOPHELES.

In the solitude of his chambers, Berkley Holt betakes himself to much serious reflection over the events of the afternoon. If the golden dreams he had indulged in had not been realised, still has he gathered a by no means contemptible harvest, and, what is more, is launched upon what he dearly loves, an intrigue. Berkley gambles, bets, schemes, with a view to the solid reality of money, undoubtedly, but he has an innate thirst for scheming, and is

never, perhaps, so keenly interested as when negotiating some nefarious Turf transaction, and of these he has had considerable experience. The game he has undertaken now to play, to wit, the breaking off of Harold Luxmoore's engagement, interests him and puzzles him. With regard to the former it is money in his pocket to conduct it ; he has a somewhat hazy interest in preventing his cousin's marriage, and, finally, he hates Harold for persistently ignoring him ; hates him still more because one of his intimates had dared to pass such a slight upon him as the Honble. Jim had done at Laxton. He attributes a good deal of Mrs. Richeton's haughty, insolent manner to the revelations of what he angrily terms his "stuck-up cousin's set," and he embarks in this conspiracy with a vindictiveness that promises good return for the moneys advanced. Theodora Richeton could have hardly invested her three hundred more advan-

tageously than in subsidizing Berkley Holt.

But about how to commence operations Berkley is somewhat at a loss. He loses no time, but, catching facile Dick Layton at the "Hædulus," insists upon their dining together, and by the time they have finished three bottles of champagne and arrived at coffee and a cigar, has gathered all Dick knows about the matter; Dick's knowledge, given in most desultory and discursive fashion, amounting, when condensed, to this—"that his sister and Luxmoore were still engaged, that correspondence was not prohibited, but that Harold was debarred the house, and that, except such as might happen casually, his father interdicted all interviews between them." Dick further intimated that his father was an obstinate old idiot, that Liddington was a doosed nice house, and that Gracie had taken his advice, and meant to stand by her engagement. "Dev'lish good fellow,

Luxmoore ; come down and meet him at Laxton next week," interposed Dick Layton a few minutes afterwards, utterly oblivious, between the fumes of the champagne and a partega of portentous blackness, that Luxmoore, as he had just said, was tabooed of the establishment.

Berkley Holt accepted with the utmost alacrity. It might be something would turn up to his advantage during such visit ; at all events it was cementing that intimacy he wished to establish at Laxton, and, notwithstanding Mrs. Richeton's warning, it was hard to make a man of Berkley's temperament understand that he could possibly wear out his welcome, and that, once accepted, any stories to his detriment would not be overweighed by his own natural advantages in the way of tact, conversation, manner, etc. All very well this, as far as it went. Berkley was paving the way, paring down the fences, so to speak ; but the further he advanced in this

wise, to continue the metaphor, the more puzzled he became as to how the race was to be run. He was fairly beat, and was at last fain to confess that interference to any advantage was beyond his imagining. Faust, when in difficulties, always sends for Mephistopheles, not only in the poem, but in actual life; so, of course, Berkley at last wrote to tell Mr. Larcher that he wanted to see him on business, and Mr. Larcher, who, truth to tell, found business so lax at Liddington that he spent more time in Crutched Friars than in Bloomshire, responded quickly to his call. Mr. Larcher writes from Liddington, being of an eminently distrustful nature, and habituated to reply more from conventional addresses than from his actual residence; having some reasons of his own, too, for wishing Berkley to believe him perpetually watching over that remote reversion, in which he may be said, to a slight extent, to have speculated.

Mr. Larcher arrives, and wriggles himself round Berkley's door-post, after his usual fashion ; he is by no means reticent as to what are his requirements, but proclaims, with his habitual chuckles, "that he declines to entertain business till he has had 'a quencher,' and comfortably settled down to a cigar." Not much habituated to indulge in either strong waters or tobacco, but the temptation of getting anything out of anybody gratuitously has always proved too much for the attorney.

"Well, my dear friend," said Mr. Larcher, puffing at his cigar with infinite gusto, "what is our little difficulty now ? You would hardly call me in for the purpose of raising more money, unless you had acquired unexpected security of some sort, I presume ?"

"No ; and shouldn't require your assistance under those circumstances," replied Holt, contemptuously.

"Ah, my dear sir, you should bear in.

mind that professional men have their little jealousies, and don't like being put on one side in such cases. With your wide range of experience, you have no doubt seen the trouble that comes of confiding your interests to a multiplicity of money-lenders ; it destroys confidence, Mr. Holt, and confidence is the backbone of all commercial transactions. When you don't pay your tailor, and don't get clothes from him, you awaken suspicions in the breast of that worthy man that you are transferring your custom. You shake his confidence in you. I need say no more."

"Certainly not. I didn't send for you to hear you preach platitudes about the borrowing of money. I know as much about the trade of money-lending as yourself. I sent for you because I've a difficult game to play, and want advice."

Mr. Larcher nodded. Not at all the man to indulge in irrelevant conversation when it came to actual business.

"It's a somewhat complicated affair. My cousin, Harold Luxmoore, is engaged to be married."

"I heard rumours of that sort at Lid-dington," rejoined Mr. Larcher, shortly.

"Then why didn't you acquaint me with them?" inquired Holt, sharply.

Mr. Larcher had not given this informa-tion, for the best of all possible reason—she had not possessed it, but he never for one instant dreamt of admitting such to be the case.

"What was the use of bothering you with hearsay?" he replied. "I waited for confirmation before I wrote."

"Well, it is a fact; of course, inimical to my interests, and I wish to prevent it if I can."

"Difficult," replied Mr. Larcher, senten-tiously. "I always told you it would be. With your cousin's income and position, he would not have to look far for a bride."

"Yes; but it so happens luck has thrown

strong cards into my hand, if I only knew how to play them. His father-in-law that is to be, objects to his continuing on the Turf, and, as you and I know, he must."

"I don't see what more you want," observed Mr. Larcher, "you're in luck; the thing settles itself."

"But the father-in-law may think better of it."

"I should think probably will, as soon as he knows how things really stand."

"But he does, and is more obstinate than ever on the subject," exclaimed Berkley.

"So much the better for you. When the father insists upon breaking off his daughter's engagement, I should think any interference of yours must be superfluous."

"You talk like a man of bygone generations," retorted Berkley. "The *fiat* of a father in these days is not so conclusive as it was supposed to be in the time of the Georges. I must have this engagement

severed on the part of the lady ; besides, it cannot be difficult to sow mistrust of a lover whom she is not allowed to see, I should think, especially with such a funnel to pour intelligence through as I can make of Dick Layton."

"Good!" replied Mr. Larcher, sententiously. "I don't see you require advice from me ; you seem quite capable of conducting the case, I should say."

"Yes ; but, unluckily, they are still allowed to correspond."

"They are making your game shamefully easy for you," chuckled Mr. Larcher. "Nothing could be more fortunate."

"Perhaps so," retorted Berkley, "but you'll excuse my observing, I don't quite see it."

"My dear Holt, you must be blind. Can't you see, if you only intercept that correspondence for a few weeks, what a crop of mistrust and misconception you will sow ?"

"I have not overlooked that; but it is none so easy of accomplishment. Tampering with Her Majesty's mails is a risky matter, and buying a postman is mighty near akin to felony."

"Who talked of bribing the officials? No, we mustn't do anything quite so daring as that; but don't humbug yourself, my friend. You'll be paying somebody to steal letters, however you may gloze it over under the phrase of 'intercepting a correspondence.' It's not a pleasant business to be discovered engaged upon."

The attorney's brutal frankness made Berkley wince. If we put the right name to our peccadilloes beforehand, it would serve to keep some of us in the straight path. No more specious deception do we play off upon ourselves than that of calling our vices by pretty titles, instead of labelling them by their genuine appellations.

"You don't wrap your prescriptions up in silver paper, anyway," rejoined Berkley,

grimly. "Perhaps you would be kind enough to indicate where you would interpose between such a correspondence and the lady it is addressed to?"

"I should imagine a servant to be the easiest and safest tool to purchase in such a case," replied Mr. Larcher, suavely.

"By Jove, you are right!" exclaimed his companion quickly. "You'll have to manage this for me. You see, I can't well get hold of Luxmoore's valet myself. It's impossible for me to appear in the matter."

"Nothing easier; at all events, if you can't manage it, the arrangement bids fair never to be completed."

"You mean to say you'll have nothing to say to it, then," rejoined Holt, angrily.

"I'm not going to do work for which you possess peculiar advantages," replied Mr. Larcher, lounging back in his chair with much seeming satisfaction.

"The devil I do! As things stand I should imagine my even speaking to any

servants of Luxmoore's calculated to arouse suspicion."

"Bah!" sneered the attorney. "Never waste time buying a man in a case of this kind when a woman will serve your turn. They generally cost less, and do such work more adroitly. There are two ends to a correspondence, and the easiest for you to get at is, of course, the lady's. Why, you have admittance to that house. Run down to Laxton, and see if there is not a ladies' maid there with a *penchant* for gold and flattery. If not, it's the most immaculate establishment ever I heard of. The class, by prescriptive right and tradition, are always to be bought, and I have little doubt you would find the agent you require there. Bear in mind, too, no woman of that class would see much harm in stealing a letter, especially if she thinks it is to forward a love affair on your part."

"Gad! you're right," cried Holt, with considerable admiration for the cunning

attorney's lightly-sketched scheme. Nothing can be easier than to volunteer myself for a few days at Laxton. I recollect seeing a coquettish young woman when I was there last, much disposed to make eyes at myself, or any one else for the matter of that, who was a ladies' maid of some kind, I fancy. That's the girl we want, depend upon it."

"Say you want," observed Mr. Larcher, laconically.

"No; I repeat, we want. I take it you have a pretty considerable interest in my off chance of coming into Lid-dington. That money you advanced, for instance——"

"Was a wild speculation," interposed Mr. Larcher. "I have a fancy, sometimes, for taking a long shot about an outsider; but this little affair will require more money probably. Young women of the stamp we're talking about are wont to have itching palms, and don't commit the ab-

straction of love-letters unless they're well paid for it. I'm not going to put any more money in the speculation."

"Who asked you? I've plenty of money for all that," replied Holt, triumphantly.

"I'm glad to hear it," returned Mr. Larcher. "Would it be inquiring too far to ask where you obtained it?"

"Yes; it's nothing to you. Quite enough for you to know that I am not thinking of asking you for any."

"No; that would be a waste of your persuasive powers that I give you credit for not being likely to be guilty of," said Mr. Larcher, with his peculiarly offensive chuckle.

"You get insolent, sir," said Holt, fiercely.

"Pooh!" rejoined the attorney, contemptuously. "*Gentlemen* who are discussing such delicate topics as ourselves, can't well be that to each other. Do you

want to know why I have lent you money? You shall. Do you suppose the most speculative money-lender in all London would have advanced even as much as I have done on such a shadowy reversion as yours? No. I knew you, my friend, and when I heard the terms of that will I felt sure that sooner or later you would be at the hatching of one or two of the biggest Turf robberies of modern times, and, my dear friend, I mean to be in 'em too. As for these other little games of yours, you are welcome to the benefit of my advice; but no scheming of yours will prevent your's cousin's marrying. If you succeed in breaking off this, it will only result in his marrying some one else; still, you're right, from your point of view, to fight hard for Liddington Grange. When he looks like winning the Derby I might find a little more money for you, if you thoroughly explained what you meant doing with it; but recollect one thing, I know

more about the ins and outs of the Turf than you suppose, and if you attempt to humbug me there you'll rue it. Whatever move you make there I expect to be informed of. We'll work together, but I am a dangerous man to sell, mind."

Holt was a cool man, collected enough under most circumstances, and had been indoctrinated into no little of the rascaldom of the world he lived in ; but his confederate's outspoken words rather staggered him. He had looked upon this man as one to whom he could dictate, who would obey his bidding, and now he saw that what he had of late dimly suspected was only too true. Mr. Larcher had purchased him as assuredly as if he had bought him in a slave market. He knew the five hundred the attorney had advanced him was on bills that gentleman could proceed upon at any time. True, there was an understanding between them that these bills were never to be proceeded with to his

detriment till such time as he might become master of Liddington Grange, when they were to be redeemed for ten thousand. No such an out-of-the-way advance upon so vague and distant a reversion as Berkley's. But Mr. Larcher's tone made him clearly comprehend that understanding would be very little thought of if they two should chance to fall out.

"You speak plain," said Holt, at length, "and that you have got a hold over me to some extent, I'll admit. But, my friend, I could repay you your five hundred with very little difficulty if you get troublesome, and close all transactions between us."

"You must have had rather a good time at the 'Hædulus' of late," observed Mr. Larcher, sceptically, "and have forgotten how to calculate compound interest at sixty per cent. besides."

"You know perfectly well there is no such understanding about those bills, and

that your claim wouldn't be worth sixpence in a court of law," rejoined Holt.

"I don't think you'd care about facing a court of law," retorted Mr. Larcher.

"Listen," said Berkley, rising. "If you threaten to give me the slightest trouble about the matter I'll put the thing in the hands of a solicitor to-morrow, pay five hundred into court, demand the bills back, and leave the interest for the judge who hears the case to decide. I don't think you'll get much change out of that. The law does not recognize exorbitant interest, nor lean to the side of those who trade in it."

"Excellently put," replied Mr. Larcher, with that evil chuckle of his. "Capital! What a poker-player you must be. I never knew how good you were at the game of brag till now. But, you see, you will have to put up the stakes; to show the five hundred before you start as the virtuous victim. He! he!" chuckled the

attorney, "Berkley Holt as the neophyte entrapped by the money-lenders. It will be funny, devilish funny."

Berkley looked at his antagonist for a moment, and then said, coolly, "Yes, I can play brag, and better even than you give me credit for. Do you see this!" and as he spoke he drew a note case from his breast, and exhibited, to Mr. Larcher's astonishment, that little sheaf of notes he had received from Mrs. Richeton. "There's three hundred there," he continued, "and I can have as much more if I want it. Where I got it, or how I got it, or am to get the like sum again, is nothing to you. You're clever, very, no doubt, but you've not quite got Berkley Holt's neck beneath your foot. Give me any more trouble or insolence, and I'll pay you off and discharge you as I would any other servant, who grew impertinent through fancying himself a necessity."

Mr. Larcher's collapse was complete.

He had none of Holt's physical audacity, and was of that stamp, who, when roughly collared, lie down and take their punishment like a whipped hound. He had deemed Berkley completely within his toils, and that those bills were quite without his compass of meeting. Now he suddenly woke to the fact that this was not so.

"I don't want to make any unpleasantness, I'm sure," he replied, in a cringing voice. "You aggravated me, or I should never have alluded to those bills. Of course I didn't mean what I said. We can't afford to quarrel, Holt; we want each other too much. Forget all that's been said, and look upon it that I am willing to work hand in hand with you for the Liddington Grange estates."

"Yes," said Berkley, contemptuously, "I should suppose you would that, little as you think of my chance. It's ten thousand in your pocket if it ever comes off, which is quite sufficient guarantee for your doing

all you know. As far as the Turf part of the affair may go, you may be quite certain to know all about it, as I shall be sure to require a confederate, and I'll pay you the compliment to say that I don't know any one so fitted to be partner in a well-concocted robbery as yourself."

"I'll say good night," replied Mr. Larcher, sullenly. "You're not pleasant as a host, altogether. I'd advise you to lose no time in running down to Laxton, in pursuance of our original conversation ; but, mark me, there's not much chance of stopping Luxmoore's marriage, in the long run."

"Perhaps not ; but perpetual check prolongs the game at times, and Providence may interfere in my behalf—who knows ?" rejoined Holt.

Mr. Larcher mused much as he walked home upon how Berkley had managed to recruit his finances ; also upon the knowledge he had shown concerning bill trans-

actions. He had been clever, too. These acceptances for the five hundred were apparently of the ordinary nature, and the deed, which guaranteed the payment of ten thousand for them on the falling in of the Liddington Grange reversion, was a separate document.

CHAPTER II.

BLITHEDOWN.

IT is a fine February afternoon, and the sun, although getting low in the horizon, still flashes merrily across the wild-looking Blithedown country. No fences, no timber, nothing but a vast expanse of virgin turf. Here and there, it is true, a somewhat brighter green betrays, although no record concerning it remains, that the old pasture has been in bygone years desecrated by the plough. It requires a practised eye to detect it, but it is plainly visible all the same; and Mr. Darlington; the trainer, who gallops his horses hereon, would inform you that he could tell with shut eyes, by

the dead thud of their hoofs, when his charges leave the unbroken swath and cross that once ravaged by the plough, years ago, ay centuries, though it be since it was once more laid down in grass. Here and there dotted about are flocks of sheep, carefully shepherded by men and dogs—active black-faced sheep, that can bear being driven some distance both to water and the artificial food that the scarcity of grazing makes necessary at this season of the year,—sheep of that famous Down breed much esteemed by epicures in mutton.

At the foot of some undulating ground to the north-east stands a well-to-do farmhouse, apparently notable for its extensive range of stables and outbuildings, and also for having in front of it what gives promise of being a very pretty garden, such time as the midsummer sunshine shall beam fiercely down upon it. At the small wicket-gate leading out upon the

road, which ribbon-like winds its way across the Downs, is standing a quietly dressed man, with his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his trousers. A black felt hat is tilted rather over his eyes, which gaze keenly on the dust occasioned by a little cavalcade of horses some mile or so distant. A singularly impassive face, but redeemed from stolidity by a quick, dark eye. He is clean shaven as a Roman Catholic priest or a utility actor; his well-cut suit of dittos gives no clue whatever to his position; his scarf is conspicuous for its accurate folds only, and is fastened by a pin, of which the head consists of a tiny gold bead; a flower in his button-hole, although it is winter time, and a crutch-handled hazel walking-stick, complete Mr. Darlington's attire. Tall and spare, with a singularly quiet, deliberate manner, you would probably have put Mr. Darlington down as a gentleman farmer. After talking with him an hour, it was odds you

came to the conclusion that he was an eminent horticulturist; but that he had anything to do with horses was probably the last inference you would draw concerning him.

A few minutes, during which the cavalcade steadily approaches, consisting obviously of half a dozen horses in their clothing, following one another in Indian file, and the trainer, drawing his hands from his pockets, takes his crutch-handled stick from beneath his arm, and calls, in a somewhat musical voice, "Gibson!"

A middle-aged man, in a neat stable suit, promptly emerges from one of the out-buildings in response.

"You can open the doors of the boxes. I see Mr. Calvert on the road close by, and the new half-dozen will be here directly. Mind the chill is well off the water this evening; iced drinks don't suit horses, any more than Christians, after a February journey."

A few minutes more and Mr. Darlington walks a little way down the road, and, pausing at the open gate leading to the stables, greets Mr. Calvert and his charges in his habitual undemonstrative fashion.

"How are you, Darlington?" says the stud-groom heartily, as he bends from Lacedemonian's back to shake hands with the trainer. "I've brought you a promising lot this year; a string which is to change the luck of the black and crimson hoops, if I'm any judge of young ones."

"We'll hope so," replied the trainer, drily. "Considering what blood you have down at Liddington, it's quite singular what a lot of failures you have turned out of late; but it will be so at times," added Mr. Darlington, as he noticed a somewhat hurt expression cross the stud-groom's face. "The best blood in England, and it can't win a selling race, is a certificate we can all give to a good many of 'em."

In the mean while they have entered the

big stable yard, and, Calvert and the boys having dismounted, their charges are led quietly away to the boxes prepared for them. The stud-groom knows the trainer too well to think that he will manifest any curiosity to see the yearlings this evening. Mr. Darlington's impassive phlegm has more than once irritated him upon such occasions; but he understands at last that Darlington is quietly methodical in all his arrangements. He knows that the boxes have been thoroughly prepared for the reception of his pets, and that the trainer will go round his stables at his accustomed hour, to see that all the horses under his charge have been properly done up for the night; but he is quite aware that Darlington will not even have one stripped for his inspection before to-morrow morning.

"The tax-cart brought your traps some twenty minutes ago," observed the trainer. "Come in; Mrs. Darlington will be very glad to see you, and then, we've the old

programme, you know—a bit of dinner at six, and a quiet pipe and chat afterwards."

Mrs. Darlington welcomed the stud-groom with great cordiality. She was a much more effusive person than her lord and master; a hearty, buxom, bustling lady, that kept a keen eye over the whole establishment, looking after the laundry, dairy, and the dinners of the stable boys, with much diligence and satisfaction. There was this difference between the pair: the men and lads about the place respected Darlington as a firm and just master, but they stood in considerable awe of him; while, as for the mistress, they would one and all do anything for her, and were more distressed at receiving one of her good-humoured jobations than at the most cutting invectives delivered by her husband.

"Well, Mr. Calvert," she exclaimed, in her own genial, though somewhat boisterous manner, "I know you've brought

us a string of real beauties this time, and, what's more, I feel they're going to be lucky beauties. I could have cried my eyes out last year when that Kingston colt turned roarer. You needn't laugh, man. I'd made up my mind he was to win the Two Thousand, and Tom, there, knows that means a new dress and a new bonnet to me; and where's the woman, Mr. Calvert, wouldn't cry about her favourite going wrong when she had all that on it?" And Mrs. Darlington finished with a jolly laugh, very contradictory of the tears she was supposed to have shed on that melancholy occasion.

"Mrs. Darlington, you know a horse when you see him, as well as your husband does," replied Calvert, laughing, "and, what's more, are a good deal more outspoken when you're pleased. Of course, you'll come out as usual to-morrow morning to have a look at the youngsters, and if you don't say there's two of them, if not

three, that look like being worth a bonnet and dress to you, never trust my opinion of a yearling again."

"And sound as trouts, eh ?" asked the lady, keenly.

"Only one of the half-dozen there's a doubt about."

"And that's the pick of the basket, of course," chimed in the trainer.

"Wrong for once, though he's much too nice a topped one to have doubtful hocks ; but so it is, and you must make the best you can of him. He'll race, never fear, if he stands the training."

"There's a good many of 'em would that," replied Mr. Darlington, sententiously. "That's just where it is ; they either crack up or can't stay. But come along ; you'd like to wash your hands before dinner, and the wife's punctual on these points."

"Yes ; six to a minute," replied Mrs. Darlington, "and it only wants a quarter."

The mistress of Blithedown Farm was

much too "managing a woman" to feel any fear of shortcomings at her dinner-table, and a good bit of fish, an excellent saddle of Down mutton, and the apple tart that followed was a *menu* that a Sybarite might have sat down to without much feeling of dissatisfaction, flanked as it was with tankards of "home-brewed," and some excellent wine. Mr. Darlington himself adhered closely to claret, and paid a good deal more for what he habitually drank than people of much greater social pretensions ; but the manager of a racing stud is pretty fairly remunerated, as he ought to be. When it is not so the owner is indulging in a very expensive economy.

But mutton and wine have been done due justice to ; the cloth is cleared, and the trio gather round the fire. Mr. Calvert has been accommodated with the long clay, which is the only fashion of taking tobacco that finds favour in his eyes ; and that his

host should indulge in cigars is always a latent cause of irritation to the stud-groom, who, in the recesses of his breast, considers it an aping of his betters that Mr. Darlington deserves putting down about. However, he keeps such ideas to himself, and prepares to enjoy a thorough good talk about racing—past, present, and to come—though he might augur from former experience that it is only of the past the reticent Darlington can ever be induced to speak.

"Well," he said, "I suppose I'm to take the Kingston colt back with me?"

"Yes," replied the trainer, "he's no use here; he's gone from bad to worse. He began to whistle about six weeks before the Criterion, and you know how he stood still at the hill there. I begged Mr. Luxmoore not to be too sweet."

"I understand Mr. Harold lost a mint of money over it," replied Calvert.

"I'm afraid so," rejoined Darlington. "I

didn't know at the time he ever plunged, or else I'd have spoke out more."

"Pity you didn't," rejoined the groom, shortly.

"It was ; but, you see, Calvert, I didn't want to show the colt up altogether, and I thought he could take a hint. I was afraid he'd blurt it out if I told him all I feared, and there was the Derby money to be saved if possible, remember, and some of that is hedged, at all events."

"It was bad luck," observed Mrs. Darlington. "I don't think we ever had one much quicker, as Tom will admit ; but, of course, when they get wheezy there's not much to be done with them."

"Cheaper to have done with them," said her husband. "Even in a T.Y.C. it's all up if they haven't things quite their own way. It's all over if they ever have to really race."

"No good talking about past ill luck, is it, Mrs. Darlington ? You'll see to-morrow

what a set of beauties I have brought you. How's old Shooting Star, by the way? He'd be handy, perhaps, for Chester or the Great Metropolitan if he's doing well."

"The old horse is pretty much himself as far as I can guess," replied the trainer. "I shouldn't wonder if there's a race or two in him yet. He'll make a right good schoolmaster this year, any way."

"And where do you think of placing him?" inquired the stud-groom, curiously. "Spring handicaps, or later on?"

"Too early to trouble about such matters," rejoined Darlington. "We shall enter him a good bit, I dare say, and he'll run when he's ripe."

"Of course you'll want to ascertain he's in form, if only to try the young ones later on. Don't hurry Coriolanus, pray, Mr. Darlington. Give him time, and I'll engage he turns out a clinker."

"Mr. Calvert, your glass is empty," interposed the hostess, who knew well her

husband was apt to wax slightly irritable at unsolicited advice regarding his vocation. "And now," she continued, after having seen to the replenishment of her guest's tumbler, "I'm off to bed. Pleasant dreams to you, and don't fear but what I shall be out before breakfast to look at Coriolanus and his companions ;" and, so saying, Mrs. Darlington lit her bed candle, and departed.

Calvert and his host smoked and talked on for another hour, but it was principally of farming or of bygone racing. Not one syllable could the stud-groom call to mind that had escaped Darlington's lips on the subject of the coming campaign. Mr. Calvert's knowledge of the Liddington horses when he sought his pillow was limited to the fact that he had a hopeless roarer to take away with him.

The February sun had scarce begun blinking above the horizon next morning before a handmaid's knuckles drummed

smartly at Mr. Calvert's door, and informed him that his hot water was awaiting him. The stud-groom, like all of his vocation, was used to early hours, and out of bed and splashing in his bath within five minutes of the summons. He muses grimly while shaving as to what Darlington will say to his pets when he sees them. "He don't say much, and he don't like much," mutters Mr. Calvert, as the razor travels a trifle raspy over his chin, "but, dash it all, he can't hold his tongue when he sees Coriolanus. Nobody as knows a horse could keep their mouth shut about such a picture as that."

"Just a cup of coffee to break the keen air of the morning," cries cheery Mrs. Darlington, as he gains the foot of the stairs. "Come in, it's all ready. John will be here in one minute ; he's only slipped over to the stables for a second to give some directions to Gibson, and then hey for the Downs, and to make acquaintance with the

new importation ! Bonnets, Mr. Calvert, are terrible dear nowadays, and I really do hope I'm to have a turn shortly."

"It's in the bag this time, I do think," replied the stud-groom, laughing, "and you must insist on the young squire putting you on twenty to nothing."

"Just so," laughed the hostess. "We haven't brought off a big race at Blithedown for long enough, and, from myself to the stable-boys, we are all waiting for a Derby. But here's John ; he's had his coffee, so come along."

A small waggonette appeared at the door, with Mr. Darlington on the box, as she spoke, and in another minute they were rolling across the Downs to the exercise ground. A bare mile, and the trainer pulls up, as a string of fourteen horses, carefully hooded and sheeted, pass them in Indian file. Mrs. Darlington gives a contemptuous toss of her head, and then, turning to Calvert, remarks—

"The first eight are rubbish, bar one, and that's old Shooting Star. As for the others, Tom will be bothered even to get out of them in selling races. The fact is, Mr. Calvert, it don't seem possible to get 'em in light enough; not from what they've done, oh no, but for what they've got to do. Twenty years ago and I'd have run the lot myself. Don't laugh; they wouldn't have beat me very far in a hundred yards or so."

As the ninth horse reaches the carriage, Gibson, who, mounted on a useful cob, is in command of the string, gives his orders, and the last half-dozen are halted. The boys slip from their backs, and, holding their charges by the head, quietly await further instructions. Gibson swings himself out of the cob's saddle, and, leaving that well-schooled animal to his own devices, proceeds to unloosen the surcingle, and strip the horse in front of the wagonette.

"Got the fillies in front, I see, Darlington," remarks Calvert. "Hope you'll get a race or two out of them, but I'm not particularly fond of either of them. Sound though, and good-tempered, which is something."

"Yes, of course that's something," replied Darlington, drily. "The cob there's all that, and very useful in his way."

Narrowly did the trainer scan the pair, but he vouchsafed no remark further than a curt order to put the rugs on again.

His wife, after the manner of her sex, was less reticent, but no whit more complimentary.

"No bonnets nor dresses there, Mr. Calvert, I am afraid. I can't see either a Thousand Guineas, Oaks, or Leger in the pair."

"Useful filly the second, ma'am. Might improve into a stayer. Stout blood in her veins. Possible she might land the Oaks in a baddish year."

"Just so, Mr. Calvert. They run in all sorts of forms, and she may be a deal better than she looks, and, as you say, nobody ever can say how bad the field for the Oaks may be."

"Never mind the fillies, Mrs. Darlington. I only bragged about my colts, remember. What d'ye think of this one?"

"Ah, this is Coriolanus, then?"

"Not a bit of it," replied Calvert, testily, as the sheets were stripped from the great slapping brown colt we saw some four months or so ago at Liddington. "This is Lacedemonian."

"Ah, this looks more like bonnets," cried the lady, enthusiastically. "He's a race-horse this, every inch of him. What a fore hand, and what shoulders! A leetle slack-loined, don't you think?"

"Well, Darlington," cried Calvert, in great glee, "that's something like the sort you want, isn't it?"

"Nice colt," replied the trainer senten-

tiously. "See you have had the irons to him, though."

"Yes, just as a precaution; nothing more. His hocks will stand, never fear," exclaimed Calvert, hurriedly. He was as jealous of holes being picked in his pets as a collector of flaws being discovered in his china.

"Now, what is this, Mr. Calvert? I don't quite like his colour, but with thighs let down like that, he's bound to be a quick one."

"That's Hypocrite, by Beelzebub out of Happy Land. He's a lovely galloper, though, of course, I've never fairly seen him out in that way. He steals over the ground without the slightest effort, and is as sound as a bell."

"He looks like being fast; but I've a prejudice against those washy chestnuts. They're very apt to be faint-hearted, don't you think?"

Mr. Calvert tapped his boots with the

stick he carried, meditatively. He remembered that this was precisely the exception the Honble. Jim had taken to Hypocrite last autumn. It went very much against the grain with Calvert to admit that there could possibly be a soft place in any promising colt that came from Liddington ; still, he was fain to confess that it was not a colour he was partial to. " But, you see, Mrs. Darlington, there's no hard and fast rule about colour in race-horses any more than in your own sex. Now, we don't call grey a good colour ; but just remember old Chanticleer, though, of course, you can't, as he was a bit before your time. Well, again, I met a young woman many years ago with grey hair, and lots of it. She was very little turned of twenty all the same."

" And what came of it ? " asked Mrs. Darlington, with all the keen interest of a woman scenting a love story.

" Nothing, worse luck ! She'd gone the

wrong side of the post, poor thing, though she'd been more sinned against than sinned. I offered to make her an honest woman, but she was of the right sort, and said, 'She'd bring no shame to any man's house,' and"—here Mr. Calvert stopped abruptly, and stabbed the turf fiercely with his stick.

"She thanked you, and died," whispered Mrs. Darlington, gently. "I can see it in your face. Forgive me for asking too much. I didn't know."

Yes, poor Lizzie Dixon years ago had rejected the golden love for the tinsel-like passion of Berkley Holt, but had been too true a woman to yield to her old lover's importunities and suffer him to take to wife so besmirched a creature as her luckless self.

"Coriolanus, I'm sure," suddenly exclaims Mrs. Darlington, in tones of such ecstasy as roused Calvert at once from his sad reflections; and even her husband exhibited some slight signs of interest as the

clothes were stripped from the crack of the Liddington Grange lot. "What a beauty!" continued the lady. "Upon my word, he is hard to pick a hole in, whether for colour, shape, or anything else."

"Looks like bonnets, that, Mrs. Darlington," said the stud-groom, with a chuckle of delight, as he stepped forward to pat his idol on the neck. "How about those forelegs," he continued, addressing the trainer, "flat, and like iron? Look at his quarters: there's hocks for you; they'll want no irons; pasterns long, springy, and elastic as indiarubber; ribbed up, barrels are no use to him. Good eye, too; hasn't he?"

"Hold on a bit, Calvert," interposed the trainer, laughing; "I ain't going to buy him, you know. He's a good-looking colt, but a little nervous, I should think."

"Nervous? Nonsense. Might play the drum on his back in a week, I should think, if you practised him. Hang it, Mrs. Dar-

lington, they ought to give him the Derby without troubling him to gallop for it, on his looks alone. Don't you think so?"

"Certainly; and," with that especial eye for bonnets which all women have, "I hope they may," replied Mrs. Darlington, with a laugh.

"How's he move?" observed the trainer, quietly.

"Just like machinery. Gallops a trifle wide behind, otherwise you couldn't find a fault in him."

"Hope I shan't. He's the best-looking you've sent us for some time; bar he looks a trifle scary, I'd say he'd do. But what's this?"

"Oh, that's Beggarman. He's a bit backward, although he's so big. He's not quite clean bred. At least, we don't exactly know his dam's pedigree."

"Pity you didn't keep him a bit longer. He looks all to pieces. Besides, what's the use of sending me half-bred stuff to win races with?"

"The squire's orders, Darlington, the squire's orders, or else I don't know whether you'd ever have seen him at Blithedown. He's a bad feeder for one thing, and I'm ashamed of his condition myself; but he's not a bad-shaped one altogether when you look him over, and as for nerve, that colt don't know what it means. If you fired cannon all round him he would only argue out with himself what was going on. He'd never show that it annoyed him; in fact, would pretend to know nothing about it. He's about the quaintest, queerest young one I ever had."

"You are right. He's not altogether a bad-shaped one, though he's a scarecrow to look at just now. He might, if we can put any flesh on him, turn out useful as a harness horse by-and-by. But it's time for breakfast. Come along," and Mr. Darlington, resuming the reins, drove his wife and Calvert back to the house.

"What do you think of the young ones,

Tom?" inquired Mrs. Darlington, in the evening after Mr. Calvert and the condemned roarer had taken their departure.

"Can't see what the deuce was the use of sending me two jady fillies, a cripple and a half-bred," replied the trainer, in injured tones. "Calvert's grand team dwindle down to a brace of colts, Coriolanus and Hypocrite. The old story of the nefarious strawberry pottle, with shocking bad fruit at the bottom."

CHAPTER III.

A FRIENDLY VISIT.

THERE had been considerable dismay at Laxton when Dick Layton broke the approaching advent of Berkley Holt to his sisters. It was not that the girls had aught positively to allege against him, but that they had come to understand he was of the class "not to know." Society invariably has a contingent of this undesirable species floating about its borderland, and you must have been fortunate indeed in your journey through life if you have not unwittingly picked up such acquaintance. It would not be difficult to write a whole volume on this theme—on people not to know from

every point of view, but I am alluding not to those who make days of bitterness to us from their negative capacity of boredom, but to those whom society looks askance at from a general idea that it is dangerous for it, society's pockets, to do otherwise. Neither Annie nor Grace Layton knew anything against Berkley Holt. They had heard no story to his detriment, but they were quite alive to the fact that Luxmoore, Jim Laceby, Cyril Herrick, and all that set, quietly but positively declined to know him. The two former, we may rest assured, were authorities having much weight with the Laxton ladies, and therefore it was with undisguised disgust that they received their brother's announcement—

“ Got a line from Berkley Holt to say he'll drop in on us for two or three nights on his way to—I forget what's its name. Don't see quite how it's in his way you know, but I expect he'll drop in.”

“ Impossible, my dear Dick,” cried Miss

Layton. "We don't want Mr. Holt, and can't have him, and you'd better write and say so."

"Oh, I dare say," retorted her brother. "I can't well put him off, and you made no objection to him when he was here before. Poor Berkley's not a bad fellow, although he's such an unlucky beggar."

"He's a man the less you know of the better," said Gracie, with a toss of her head.

"Why, I should be glad to learn. You always combine to abuse my friends; perhaps you'll be a little specific, and say what's wrong with Berkley Holt."

"As if you didn't know," chimed in Annie.

"No, I don't, nor you either," replied her brother, doggedly; "and if Gracie has got anything definite to allege, perhaps she'll speak out."

It was not often that Dick Layton got the better of his sisters in argument, for of

a verity the brains of the rising generation of the Laytons were centred in the women; but this was just what the girls could not do—"allege anything definite against Berkley." They were as convinced that they were in the right as if they possessed what the French police would call his *dossier*, and prepared to stand by their belief with all the *abandon* that women will place in their estimate of a man, be it for good or be it for evil.

"Of course you've nothing to say; people often abuse poor Berkley, and when you come to have it out with them, it's only just because he's so deuced unlucky," said Dick Layton, triumphantly.

"Do you find him unlucky when you bet or play cards with him?" retorted Annie, sharply. "We don't know much, but we know you do such things at the 'Hædulus' occasionally."

"That's nothing to do with it," returned her brother, with an unpleasant reminis-

cence of "poor Berkley" having had little to complain of about his luck as far as their immediate transactions were concerned. "Anyway, he has written to say he will come, and I can't well put him off. I don't know why you shouldn't be civil to him for two or three days. You found no fault with him when he was here before."

Dick Layton had undoubtedly rather the best of the argument, but that matters little when you are discussing affairs with a woman.

"I should hope, Dick, we are always civil to people who come to Laxton," replied Annie, with much stateliness. "You tax us pretty hard at times, and seem to think that all your race-course acquaintances are fit intimates for your sisters."

"No, I don't," rejoined Dick, angrily. "Fellows I know have turned up here at times whom I never meant to come. You know one can't help giving general invita-

tions occasionally, but, of course, fellows ought to understand you don't mean it exactly. You see what I mean?"

"Yes; but your friends don't, and take you at your word. It would be nicer for us if you were a little more careful," said Gracie.

"Of course. I shall be in future. Deuced stupid of fellows to believe you mean what you say in the middle of a race-course lunch. They ought to consider the sun and the champagne, and all that sort of thing, don't you know."

"A little too prosaic for you, eh, Dick," said Annie. "Well, take my advice, imitate them, and be a little more reticent in future."

"Oh, by Jove! they're not reticent, you know. Ask one down to all sorts of places; only thing is, they're not so explicit as they ought to be about their addresses. Very pleasant fellow asked me not long ago to stay with him for the Grand

National, but I can't quite make out where it is he lives."

"Dick, Dick, you are hopeless," returned Annie, laughing. "That's a race-course friend with a mythical home, depend upon it. Although we had rather you had not asked Mr. Holt here, we shall treat him with all proper courtesy, you may rely upon it; but we certainly would rather you didn't do so again."

"Why? I don't see why I shouldn't ask my friends to Laxton," retorted Dick, sulkily.

"Why?" replied Annie. "Situated as Gracie is with regard to Harold Luxmoore, it is obvious. You must be blind, indeed, if you cannot see that the cousins are not on terms."

"Well, thanks to the governor's absurd ideas, and mind, I quite take your side, Gracie; there is not much danger of their meeting at present."

"No; but you must see, Dick, that

Harold is sure to hear of his being at Laxton, and won't probably like it," said Grace, pleadingly.

"Yes, I see that," replied her brother, "and it shan't happen again, little woman, if I can prevent it. The governor is treating you deuced bad, and making a holy show of himself, as they will do at his age. Why should Luxmoore give up racing, for one thing; and how can he, situated as he is, for another?"

"Never mind all that, Dick. We won't have papa abused, Gracie, will we," replied Miss Layton. "We don't want at present to open that vexed question. It is rather hard on her, remember, and you need not remind her of that fact. It will all come right before long, I have no doubt. Harold don't bet, you know, and that is what papa is so particular about."

"Luxmoore don't bet!" cried Dick Layton, with undisguised compassion for his sister's ignorance. "Do you suppose a

man can carry on racing, and not bet? There's about two swells in a generation who do; but they are marvellous exceptions, and always rolling in riches. You can't possibly make it pay unless you bet."

"But Harold doesn't bet heavily," interposed Gracie, with some anxiety.

"Depends upon what you call heavily," replied her brother. "I should have been deuced sorry to have had to settle his account after the Houghton Meeting."

"You mean that he lost a deal of money?"

"Just so," replied Dick.

"I wish he didn't bet; but it's all his uncle's fault if he does," retorted Gracie. "You say yourself a man cannot keep race-horses and hope to make it pay if he does not; and, as he must keep race-horses, he must bet."

"Most logically demonstrated, my sister," cried Annie Layton, laughing. "I'll retain you as counsel for the defence the first

time I'm in difficulties. But, Dick, I don't think there is any necessity for letting papa know Harold bets."

"Not the least," replied her brother, drily. "If he don't know it already, I'll lay odds he does before he is six months older. It stands to reason he must. You know the governor's very fond of a little bit of racing, and always goes to Epsom, Ascot, etc. Well, Luxmoore bets big enough to be talked about, and he's safe to hear of him, either as a heavy winner or loser this summer. I'll keep my mouth shut about it, but you'll see it won't make any difference."

. The two girls were fain to acknowledge the probability of this at once. If Harold bet heavily, it was not likely that a man who took such a lively interest in turf matters as Mr. Layton would fail to hear of it; but, as we know, Luxmoore had admitted already that he did so, in the interview he had with the old gentleman in the study at Liddington.

"Well, it's perhaps all for the best," said Annie. "If papa is to give in on the subject, it must be thoroughly, as Harold says he cannot be dictated to about how he is to race. Better resolve itself into the simple question of racing and no wife, or a wife and no racing. Come along, Gracie."

"Only," said Dick, slowly, "that's not quite stating the case you know, because if Luxmoore chooses to ask any sensible governor, it would probably be all right, don't you see?"

"No, I don't, you great stupid!" cried Annie, sharply. "Come, it's time to dress;" and, so saying, Miss Layton led the way out of the room.

Dick looked after his sisters, and pondered for a few seconds. He was not naturally quick, and accustomed to be treated in rather off-hand fashion by Annie. He was never intentionally rude, but very apt to be *gauche* to women, whether sisters or otherwise, and gradually it did dawn

upon him that his last speech savoured strongly of brutality. No girl likes to be told that if her lover cannot have her he can take his choice of many others. Flattering to her, of course, that her captive is so highly esteemed by her compeers, but what woman in love believes that another can supply her place. The worshippers of the pure goddess of the foam are monotheists, polytheists though the adorers of the Venus Kalipyge may be.

Dinner brought with it Berkley Holt—Berkley Holt in the highest possible spirits, and on his very best behaviour. His pockets were well lined, and he was launched on a very labyrinth of mischief in the first place ; in the second, he was very anxious to keep his footing at Laxton. Reasons good these for seeing those high spirits never waxed offensive. It argued well for Berkley's *savoir vivre* and conversational powers, that, though the whole family, down to his friend Dick, felt

anything but cordially towards him, and that he had some lurking suspicion of the fact, he had completely established himself before the bed-room candles were lit. I don't mean to say that the slightest coolness was suffered to appear by any of the family in their welcome ; but they all most assuredly would have rather he had not volunteered his visit.

"I say, Dick," said Berkley, when they found themselves *tête-à-tête* in the smoking-room, "I should like awfully to go over the Liddington paddocks once more. I don't think Harold is there, or else I'd write him a line ; but it can't matter. He knows us both, and couldn't have any objection."

Dick Layton might not be very clever, but he did see much objection to his taking Berkley over to Liddington. Still he was somewhat puzzled what excuse to make for not doing so. If you can't send a man out hunting it's such a blessing when he

suggests what will amuse him in March in the country. Situated as Harold was to the Laxton family, it was a trifling liberty to ask Calvert to let them just look round the paddocks without appealing to Luxmoore at all on the subject. That Harold was not at the Grange he knew just as well as Holt, who had made it his business to know from Mr. Larcher before proposing his visit. Berkley, anxious to do as much business as possible during his visit to Bloomshire, thought it would not be amiss to have a look at these Derby colts, about which there was a whisper now afloat through the sporting world.

"What do you want to look round the paddocks for?" asked Dick, sententiously at last.

"I want to see Luxmoore's two-year-olds, of which there are great reports about. More especially do I wish to see Coriolanus, that colt of which you rave."

"Well, never mind my ravings, if you

like. I recommend you to attend to them, and back him whenever or wherever he starts."

"I'll see him first, anyhow," remarked Holt.

"Well, that won't be at Liddington. It's no use going over to see the two-year-olds there ; they all went away to Blithedown some three weeks ago."

"Then, of course, it's no use going to Liddington. I only cared about looking at the colts about to begin this year. Getting late, and I'm tired. I think I'll say good-night."

During the next three days, Berkley Holt continued to make himself extremely pleasant. He was chatty, agreeable, and took care of himself, a never to be sufficiently commended quality in a guest received *en famille*. He was ready to join the ladies in their afternoon walks or rides ; to play billiards with Dick in the morning ; or to stroll round the home farm with the

squire, and discuss pigs or shorthorns, and Berkley could, from his old Liddington experiences, talk of such things well ; and yet, in the course of those three days, he contrived to sow the seed of a very fair average crop of mischief. He never volunteered information, but he so managed that Mr. Layton, senior, drew from him, apparently with much reluctance, an extensive history of Luxmoore's turf speculations, narrated with such comment as " Harold is rash, and over-sanguine just now. We all are in our 'prentice days on the Turf, Mr. Layton ; but he's quick and clever, and will sober down, and see the foolishness of plunging ere long, no doubt." To the sisters he never opened his lips on the subject, but he contrived, by a judiciously dropped word or two, that Annie should question him considerably as to Harold's relations with Mrs. Richeton. Here, again, apparently somewhat against his will, he was forced to admit that his cousin had

been reputed engaged to that lady, and there were not wanting those in the London world who declared he had gone too far to go back ; that he had not behaved well, in short, to Theodora Richeton. But Miss Layton knew how society talked ; so much, indeed, that he trusted she would not consider him indiscreet when he said that society had already forgotten that story, in its energetic determination to circulate the better-founded history of his engagement to Miss Gracie. Society was still full of the romance of the whole affair—the river adventure at Richmond, etc.

“ And society, I presume, is quite convinced that Mr. Luxmoore and Mrs. Richeton stand upon somewhat distant terms at present ? ” inquired Annie, carelessly.

Now a Mephistopheles new to his trade, an inferior artist that is, would have jumped at such chance to insinuate that Harold Luxmoore still visited Theodora. Berkley was too great an adept. Poisoning by

excessive doses usually culminates in discovery. Calumny, if administered in too large quantities, is apt to end in an explosion, which, like the thunderstorm, clears the air, and shivers the machinations of Mephistopheles for ever. Berkley was quite aware of this, and judging that he had insinuated quite sufficient for the time being, replied, laughing,

“Yes, society, I think, looks upon that as a tale of the past about which it need trouble itself no more.”

The night before Berkley was to leave Laxton, he retired from the smoking-room early, as indeed he had every evening of his stay. It was contrary to his usual habits, and Dick Layton rallied him somewhat about it, but Holt pleaded that one object of his country tour was to obtain some respite from London ways and London hours; that his doctor told him he'd been living a little too quick lately, and required to take a pull, so Dick said no

more. An hour afterwards, as he ascended the stairs on his way to bed, Dick fancied he heard voices on the landing above, though couched in low tones. As his candle became visible, they suddenly ceased, but Dick could have sworn to the rustle of a petticoat, and the quick but heavier tread of a man. Dick pushed rapidly up to the next landing. Down the corridor to his right he heard the faint slam of a door. Up the continuation of the staircase he still heard the faint rustle of a woman's dress. Now that corridor on the right led to the bachelors' bed-rooms, and the sole tenant of these at present, besides Dick himself, was Berkley Holt. The staircase, no longer an open one from this upper landing, led to the rooms inhabited by the female servants.

Dick stopped, and shook his head gravely. "I'm not particular," he said, "but it's deuced bad form of Berkley. He's no business to come down to Laxton, and

attempt to turn the heads of our maids. I've nothing to say to what he may do elsewhere, but, by Jove, he's no business to come down and attempt to make a fool of any of the girls here. I'll have this out with him."

He stopped opposite Berkley's door. There were no signs of a light. He opened it gently. All was darkness. He closed it stealthily, and betook himself to his room somewhat puzzled, and bethought him that he could say his say just as well in the morning. But when dressing next day, Dick was fain to confess that he did not see his way quite clear to upbraiding his wayward guest. He remembered he could not say for certain that it was Holt, and it was quite open to that gentleman to repudiate such an accusation indignantly. As to which of the maids it might have been that was guilty of such indiscretion, of course he could form no opinion. Holt was going at once; best let him go, and

say nothing about it. Besides, it was so much the easiest thing to do, and, to a flabby-minded young man like Dick Layton, there was always much comfort "in having no row, you know."

So Berkley Holt departed from Laxton amidst farewells of very average cordiality, although, perhaps, upon the whole, the family were slightly relieved at bidding him adieu.

About this time it began slowly to permeate sporting circles that Harold Luxmoore had not only a clipping colt in Coriolanus, but that the Blithedown two-year-olds generally, were something much above the average; that, in addition to the noble Roman, whom the touts already declared a rum un, with no intent whatever of punning, there was Lacedemonian and Hypocrite, both apparent flyers, to say nothing of a terrible smart filly called Lady Disdain, that had kicked off every boy at Blithedown; but the horse-watchers vowed

if she only ran straight she would take a deal of catching when her time came. As likely to go the wrong way as the right, they were forced to allow, but if a jockey could only keep her in the path of virtue, which, as we all know, leads invariably to the winning-post, nothing would get there before her.

About this time that stout, popular, and plausible book-maker, Mr. Plyant, M.T. (he put it on his business card, and people occasionally wondered whether it meant M.P.), began to back the Blithedown lot for next year's Derby pretty freely. Now, you could never complain there was no getting anything out of Mr. Plyant. There never was a man so candid ; he was always willing to tell you why he backed anything, but then his reasons were limited. It seemed, as a rule, that "It was just all for sport;" or, "Well, he'd a bit of a fancy, than which nothing's more expensive;" or else "he'd got a com." He always seemed

to have “a com,” and when some of his intimates would sternly demand from whom came these commissions, he usually answered, “From some of those jolly backers, my boy, who subscribe to keep us alive.” But it was not likely that Mr. Plyant’s brethren were to be stalled off by such simple chaff as this. They knew very well that Plyant did commissions of all sorts, and did them remarkable well, and it was quite patent to their observing minds that some of “these jolly backers” were not altogether subscribing to keep their community. Moreover, Mr. Plyant’s “fancies” did not seem to come out expensive to him on the whole, neither did his “love of sport.” So that, taking things generally, the ring, when Mr. Plyant began to back anything, took much cognizance of his proceedings. He was reputed dangerous amongst “the knights of the pencil,” though extremely popular with the brotherhood, carrying on that internecine

warfare that exists amongst themselves with much liberality, and always willing to give a hint at the last they would do well to get out, as far as possible, of the odds they had laid him. The result of this was, there was rather a *furore* to take ten to one about the Blithedown lot before any of them had been, as yet, seen in public.

Tattersall's, generally, were extremely curious to know from whom this commission emanated ; the noble army of backers, on the other hand, were extremely anxious to know which was the best of the Blithedown lot, and with that preference for the long odds, characteristic of their class, the smaller speculators began to nibble at Coriolanus and Hypocrite.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LITTLE RIFT WITHIN THE LUTE.

THE Laxton people were late in arriving in town this season, putting off their coming till after Easter. Dick, of course, had been up long before, and Mr. Layton had been up and down after his wont ; but it was not till the Easter holidays were well spent that the Laytons once more settled themselves in Grosvenor Gardens. Very anxious indeed had Gracie been for some little time back to find herself once more in London. Neither she nor Harold had been foolish in their love under the

interdict. To exchange letters once a week had been as much as they proposed, except under special provocation, and for the first four or five months of their suspended engagement, their correspondence had gone on with mutual satisfaction. No necessity to allude further to these letters than to say they were the ordinary honest love-letters two educated and tolerably sensible people might be expected to write under such circumstances. But during the last six or seven weeks a considerable change had come over Harold's letters—they arrived at slightly longer intervals; they had got somewhat shorter and somewhat colder. Gracie had pondered a good deal over these epistles. One or two sportive attacks she had made upon their brevity and want of affection, had been met with the cynical retort, "that nobody wrote long letters nowadays, and that gushing was *mauvais ton* in the nineteenth century." The girl rather fired at this,

and wrote back somewhat spiritedly, though playfully—

“ It seems, methinks, that you forget,
While in love’s dream we linger ;
You do but wear my colours yet,
The ring’s not round my finger.”

In his next letter, which was a good ten days in coming, it was suggested that poetry was nothing unless good ; that unless you were born with the heavenly fire it was as well not to scorch your complexion ; that Mrs. Brownings were rare, and Violet Fanes rather plentiful. Gracie was astounded ; she could not comprehend it all. Harold, her Harold, had never developed this unaccountable vein of cynicism. The girl’s pride was deeply wounded ; her poor little sportive stanza scarce merited such treatment as this. What could have occasioned this extraordinary change in him ? She compared these latter letters with those written in the first flush of their engagement ; could any

letters be more different in tone, expression, or affection ? As may be supposed, her own letters naturally changed also, and their correspondence was fast becoming of a most commonplace description.

Gracie, indeed, was becoming very unhappy. Sometimes she thought it would be wiser to write and suggest that all should be over between them ; that the semi-engagement which existed should be broken off. Better that, she argued, than wait till such proposition should come from Harold Luxmoore. Then she racked her brain to account for the meaning of this conduct on his part. Could anybody have come between them ? Could he have heard anything to her disadvantage ? Impossible ; her two London seasons had been innocent even of flirtation. What could any one allege against her ? No ; Harold must have mistaken his feelings towards her. His love is not strong enough to stand such a test as her father's

decision has put it to. He begins to see how hopeless their marrying really is. He may never win the Derby, and to retire from the Turf is to resign Liddington. Now he has had time to think, he doubtless considers that far too heavy a price to pay for her hand. Yes, that must be it ; Harold repents that he did not honestly tell Mr. Layton that, if his consent to their marriage was conditional upon his giving up racing, there must be an end to the affair at once. Of course, it would have been the wisest thing to do. Papa has not behaved fairly to Harold, and he resents it. Well, her course is clear ; she will write that day and release him from his troth.

Suddenly it flashed across her that she would do well to have a talk with Annie before she wrote this letter. She had shrank from confiding her unhappiness to her sister ; her pride forbade it. She could not bear to own that the man who held her heart had apparently ceased to

value it ; a confession, this, bitter for a woman to make to herself, much more so to any one else. She crossed the landing to her sister's room, which was almost opposite to her own, and found that energetic young lady busy at her writing-table.

"What is it, Gracie ?" she asked.
"Any one called whom it is imperative to see ?—if not, I'm really busy."

"No ; I want to have a talk to you."

"Won't a little later do ?" inquired Annie, as her sister deposited herself leisurely in an easy chair.

"No ; I must have it out with you at once."

Annie rose, walked quietly across to her sister, and leaning on the top of the chair, bent over, and said softly, "If it's to be a talk in earnest, Gracie, all that can afford to wait," and she jerked her head in the direction of the writing-table ; "if it's mere gossip, you can wait."

"It is anything but mere gossip," replied Gracie, sadly.

Annie drew a low chair to her sister's side, and then said, "There is something wrong between you and Harold ; I've seen it for weeks past, but didn't like to ask idle questions. Some trifle, I hoped, that his next letter might explain ; but you have looked more *triste*, Gracie, after every letter, and that is not what maidens should, you know, when their love flows smooth."

"Oh, Annie, I am very unhappy," replied the girl, bursting into tears, and dropping her head upon her sister's shoulders. It was not likely that any confession of this nature would be made without some sobs, so that Annie was not taken much aback by her sister's weeping. That men are apt to sulk and women to weep when love's path seems to contain more briars than roses, is a good general maxim to rely upon. "Now, tell me all about it," said the elder sister, after a due amount of petting and soothing had been adminis-

tered ; and then Gracie recounted the story we already know, and the resolution she had come to. "Don't you think I am right ?" she asked in conclusion.

"Let me think it over for a few minutes ; and, if you wouldn't very much mind, I should like to read his last letter or two."

Gracie gave them, and watched her sister's face anxiously while she perused them.

Annie sat for some minutes after she had finished, wrapped in thought. At last she spoke : "If it were possible to believe that Harold Luxmoore wrote these letters to you, except under some other influence, or under some utter misconception, I would say write that letter before post-time, and in the curtest and haughtiest language you possess. But I cannot think that. I can hardly believe Harold ever wrote such a letter, and nothing but the fact of seeing it in his own handwriting would have made me credit it. Listen, Gracie, you love him dearly ?"

"You know it," murmured the girl.

"And he you, and very dearly too, if ever I saw a man devoted to woman."

A warm pressure of the hand thanked Annie for thus advocating Harold's cause.

"I can't see it. I don't pretend to elucidate the riddle at present," continued Miss Layton ; "but those letters don't represent Harold's feelings for you, I'll lay my life. No ; we shall be in town now in a week or so. Let him see you are hurt—nothing more. No *congé* yet ; wait till we can investigate matters more fully. Stop ! I tell you what I think may be possible, and that is that he has fallen once more into the toils of Mrs. Richeton. You know that he was very *epris* of her once before."

"Ha !" cried Gracie, starting to her feet, with cheeks aflame and eyes afire ; "and you think that Mrs. Richeton dictated these infamous letters ? I'll write by to-night's post."

"Hush, child ! for Heaven's sake be

still! I don't imagine anything of the kind. I don't believe—to begin with—that Mrs. Richeton would stoop to anything of the kind. If she beat you, Gracie, she would beat you fairly."

Gracie shook her head disdainfully. She was deeply in love, and could more easily fancy her adversary resorting to cogged dice than could her clear-headed sister.

"In the second place," said Annie, "we are supposing Harold did not write those letters from his own inspiration."

"Yes; what then?"

"They were never inspired by a woman; certainly not Mrs. Richeton."

"What makes you say so?"

"Their whole tone. That sneering cynicism which pervades them is masculine. No woman ever writes in that way. Either Harold wrote them on his own account—which I won't believe without positive proof—or it is a man who has inspired them. They are utterly unlike

Harold's nature. The writing is his, I grant you, but the ideas—the very words, I should say—are not."

Miss Layton is a clever girl, and has studied Harold Luxmoore pretty closely.

"But," said Gracie, "if you think he may have fallen into the toils of Mrs. Richeton, how do you reconcile that with the idea of a man having inspired these letters?"

"In this way. He has, perhaps, to some extent, renewed his flirtation with Mrs. Richeton. Some one of his racing intimates thinks it much better that he should marry the widow than be tied down to an indefinite engagement with you. That man, whoever he may be, is doing his best to break off the match. Now, of all Harold's friends that I know, the only one who has undoubted influence over him is Mr. Laceby. It is impossible to suppose, Gracie, that he is working against us in this matter."

"Quite impossible!" rejoined Gracie, warmly. "He was the first to know, the first to congratulate me! No, Annie, it cannot be Mr. Laceby."

"Just so; then I come to the conclusion there is a friend of Harold's unknown to us who is striving to prevent your marriage. Here it is impossible for us to know anything; in London we shall be, at all events, more able to judge how things stand. Write, but according to my suggestion."

"So it shall be," replied Gracie. "I am so glad I came and talked it over with you. It is such a relief."

"To tell one's troubles to another—very true," replied her sister, laughing, as she rose and once more seated herself at her writing-table.

But when the Laytons had fairly settled themselves in Grosvenor Gardens, the mist that hung over Harold Luxmoore's proceedings showed no signs of lifting. His letters had ceased altogether. Upon the

few occasions that they encountered him in the park he invariably passed the Miss Laytons with a distant salutation; in society it was palpable that he avoided them. It was rarely they encountered him.

Young ladies don't pine away and wear the willow in these days, unless it be in very primitive and unenlightened parts. Society takes no cognizance of broken hearts, or indeed of broken vows, in these days. In the merry valse of the London season what matter such trifles as conjugal troth, promises to marry, or promises to pay. We look reverently up to our superiors for an example, and our morals bid fair to be much improved thereby.

Gracie Layton accompanied her sister everywhere, and the two girls were the gayest of the gay, apparently. The engagement was looked upon now by the whole family as quite broken off. Gracie said it was so herself, and requested no more might be said about it. She had one

or two short conversations with her sister on the subject when they first came to London, but even that astute young lady was compelled to admit she could make nothing of the riddle. To one thing only did she adhere firmly, to wit, that it was an entire misconception, and that Harold was the dupe of falsehood in some shape. "I'll swear he loves you, Gracie," she said, as they came in from their canter to lunch one morning. "Of course, you didn't look, but I did, full at him, when he raised his hat, and you can't think how wistfully he gazed at you. I believe, if you could but see each other alone for half an hour, all would be right between you."

"Don't be foolish," replied her sister, wearily. "All is over between us. What is the use of speculating upon such extreme improbabilities as Harold and I ever being alone together again, or our ever feeling anything but much embarrassment at such an awkward *contretemps* if it should occur."

Nevertheless the girl thought a good deal over her sister's dictum.

The Derby is over once more, and the oldest turfite, exactly like the oldest inhabitant, never recollects so much money lost and won on Epsom Downs ; the oldest inhabitant, by the way, when quoted, never does seem to recollect, which, of course, makes his testimony of incalculable value ; but rumour freely put down amongst those who "had suffered severely" Harold Luxmoore. At the clubs they said he had lost from fifteen to thirty thousand pounds. At the "Hædulus," where, everything, from their *canards* to their "*surprises on toast*," was conducted on a sensational scale, of course they adopted the higher tariff ; but Tattersall's, after the settling, declared ten had cleared his account, and perhaps, upon the whole, that might be the most reliable.

That gossip of this sort should find its way into Grosvenor Gardens from half a dozen channels was only obvious. The

air in the season is redolent of such rumours, and if Catherine Fanshaw had written in these days, she would have propounded her enigma in this fashion—

“It was whispered in Hyde Park,
’Twas muttered in clubs ;”

and the answer would have been, of course, “the latest scandal.”

Mr. Layton shook his head seriously when the story of how hard hit Luxmoore had been at Epsom reached his ears. He thought how very right he had been to insist upon Harold’s renunciation of the turf. “It is but the beginning,” he muttered; “the way with them all, and the end bearing a terrible resemblance in every case—broken health and broken fortunes. I acted wisely. If he had honestly loved the girl he would have hardly been so quick to cancel his engagement. I was mistaken, I’m afraid, in Harold; if he would only have promised not to bet, situated as

he is, I would have yielded my consent. I thought he loved my darling better than not to have had more patience. If I had found at the expiration of a twelvemonth that he confined his racing solely to the terms of his idiotic uncle's absurd will, I should probably have given way; as it is, Gracie's well rid of him."

The girls, you may be sure, talked sorrowfully over Harold's bad luck. Thanks to that theory of Annie's, they both felt more sorry than aggrieved at his conduct. Gracie knew well that this would have militated still further against Mr. Layton's yielding his consent, but that mattered little now. Her greatest comfort was her sister's assurance that things would all come right in the end, and that Harold at present was acting under some misconception, which must eventually be dissipated.

Now it came to pass that Gracie rather unexpectedly received an invitation to go to Ascot with the Crawfurd Peppletions,

who had rented a charming villa in the neighbourhood of Bracknell for that purpose. Everybody knows the Crawfurd Peppletions ; people with plenty of money, who, whenever there may be a race meeting, a cricket match, or an archery tournament, invariably are there, with lunch for all comers ; hospitable as Arabs, and ever surrounded by hampers on such occasions, to which there seems no bottom. No matter how low champagne and cup may run at surrounding carriages, you may depend upon its flowing like a perennial fountain all around Crawfurd Pepleton's break. Gracie had never seen a large race meeting, and she decided, with the consent of the authorities, to accept the invitation.

"It is possible," said her sister, "that you might see Harold there to speak to. He knows the Crawfurd Peppletions, I'm sure, and, I fancy, pretty intimately."

Gracie shook her head sadly, but the idea grew in her mind.

That night, in the silence of her chamber, there came an inspiration to Gracie. Yes, she thought, she would write one more letter to Harold, to tell him she should be at Ascot with the Pepplets, and ask him to come and see her for ten minutes; and then her cheeks tingled with shame at the idea of stooping that much to a man who had treated her as Harold had done. Were it not for that theory of her sister's, she had never dreamt of such a thing; but then, you see, she loved him very dearly, and, her love overpowering her pride, she sat down, with a flushed face, to write once more to her faithless lover. Not a very easy task this, she thinks, but she has made up her mind it shall be, though nobody but himself must ever know of such weakness; even Annie must know nothing of this.

"I know that all is over between us; and, situated as you are, and with the view papa takes of that situation, I suppose

there could be no other ending to our engagement. But, Harold, unless your lips lied when murmuring your love for me, how have I deserved such treatment? Would it not have been more manly to have frankly said the difficulties were such that you saw nothing for us but to part. I do not accuse you further than of not honestly telling me the truth. Surely I deserved, at all events, candid treatment at your hands. I am going to Ascot, and wish to see you for a few minutes—the briefest possible interview. Let me but hear from yourself that you acquit *me* of all blame, and I am content; but your latest letters vaguely hint at my being someway in fault, though how, you neither explain, nor am I able to imagine. If you ever cared for me at all, you owe me this slight explanation.

“Your sincere well-wisher,

“GRACE LAYTON.

“P.S.—I shall be with the Crawfurd Peppletions, box 28, ground tier.”

Grace folded and sealed this with a beating heart. "If there is a grain of truth in Annie's conjecture," she murmured, "surely I shall know it at Ascot." She rang the bell, and, on the appearance of her maid, said—"Post this letter yourself, Sarah; not in the house, mind, and don't speak about it."

"Yes, miss," replied Miss Hemmings, as she took the letter, and quietly disappeared.

The advent of Ascot is always productive of much excitement in the racing world. Men may bore you with the delights and the quiet of Newmarket, now quite apochryphal; they may rave over Goodwood trees and the beauty of its lawn, always reticent about Goodwood dust, by the way; but for racing, give me, first Ascot, and next, Doncaster. The given money at these two meetings, and the time they are held, insure the best horses on the Turf being there if they've a gallop

in them, and you nowhere see such sport in any four consecutive days as you do on Ascot Heath and the famous Town Moor.

At Tattersall's, the Monday before the Royal gathering, there were "good things" enough put about to have kept a man with a balance of five thousand at his banker's, and an anxiety to be on early, quite busy. It would have taken him a summer afternoon and a folio volume to have "written them down," as a good thing should be written down ; after the manner of Gad-about, for instance, in the days when the famous cavalry plunger was to the fore, or, to speak of later times, when the poor Marquis of Hastings "fancied it."

There is a strong opinion rife that the Blithedown lot are dangerous. The majority of the sporting journals state that, from all they hear, Coriolanus is a real clinker, and it is no use looking further for the winner of the New Stakes. The *Turf Guide Post*, it is true, has ventured

to couple a horse called The Felon, with him ; but Tattersall's, at all events, seem sublimely ignorant of that opprobriously named animal. Mr. Plyant flutters about, mopping his brows this hot afternoon, engaged apparently in a multitude of "coms ;" but it is noticeable that nobody has occasion to vociferate ten to one twice about Mr. Luxmoore's Shooting Star for the Ascot Stakes. When the knot forms under the clock, about five, and the leviathans of the Turf Exchange, clang out their last offers anent the Stakes and Hunt Cup, there is no ten to one offered against Shooting Star.

"I'll take eight to a hundred about Shooting Star, just to finish with," remarks Mr. Plyant, cheerfully. "A sort of tea-table bet, you know, eh, Maddison ?"

"Seven to one to a hundred against Shooting Star," replied Mr. Maddison, solemnly.

"Seven thousand to a thousand against

Shooting Star!" cried Redcar, one of the heaviest of heavy bookmakers.

" You can put that down to me, Redcar," said the Honble. Jim, languidly. " It's a point less than the odds, but it saves such a lot of trouble to have it all in one hand;" and with that Laceby sauntered leisurely out of the subscription-room.

That last bet left Shooting Star as good a favourite as anything for the Ascot Stakes.

CHAPTER V.

ASCOT.

Ascot ! The man or woman who has been ever so little of a race-goer can never help feeling a slight tingling of the pulses when it is brought before them that Ascot is "on." What memories of picnics at the back of the Stand, of cheery lunches on the roofs of drags, of "just a pick, you know, and a glass of champagne" in hack carriages, it calls forth—of flirtations in the boxes, of soft words whispered in the paddock, of lost gloves innumerable, when we allowed the unscrupulous enslaver of the hour to take everything that had the remotest chance of winning, and kept

nothing but "the glorious uncertainty," and the hundred to one chances for ourselves. Recollections of being on the winner of the Hunt Cup at twenty to one alternate with woeful reminiscences of fatal plunging on the Wokinghams, and we call to mind how often we have seen the horse that bore the fortunes of Cæsar, tire to nothing up that deadly ascent. Still, out with the latest farthingales, don the gayest of garments and daintiest of broderies, harry the hearts of Elise, White, Simes, and Co., that your garments may be ready, oh maids and matrons of Merry England ! Never mind the Laureate and his May-day twaddle, next week is the maddest, merriest week in all the mad New Year. On with your lightest kids, gentlemen ; button them up tightly, both buttons, as befits gentlemen who mean going for double sixes. Call to mind the day when the pluckiest of backers laid five thousand to a thousand on the favourite for the "New

Stakes," and landed it. What matter the fates were against you at Epsom—is there not Ascot at which to recuperate and carry on the winning account which shall see you safely through Goodwood, and stand to you till you are lost in the Capua of Brighton, and that *ultima thule* of backers, Lewes?

Ascot, at its best and brightest—Ascot, with a glorious summer sky, without a fleck in it—Ascot, on its opening day! The bookmakers are busy in the ring already, albeit the saddling bell has not as yet rung for the first race. In the parlance of the turf the favourite has had a good night, and layers are chary now of offering more than four to one against Shooting Star. The general public seem to have awoke to the fact, as the general public continually does, and very often to its extreme discomfiture, that to back Shooting Star for the Ascot Stakes was to begin the meeting in clover. What that means we all know at

everything ; to have won the toss, and reeled off a heavy innings at cricket, is to have half won the match. Betting the ring their own money, as it is termed, is naturally a playing on velvet that backers much exult in.

The paddock is thronged. Country neighbours, who see but little of each other in London, are lounging about, exchanging chat and commenting upon the horses. Racing men are scrutinizing these latter narrowly. Jockeys are there, sucking their whips for the most part, a peculiarity of their class, which seems to afford them much solace ; there are exceptions, but, as a rule, when on business they are somewhat silent, and look as if they were liable for most of the money their charges are backed for. Trainers, of course, are there in numbers—no trainer ever misses Ascot if he can help it—exchanging notes and light badinage amongst themselves, or engaged in confidential talk with their

employers. Against the palings near the shed, at the far end of the paddock, is a group of four persons engaged in earnest conversation, or rather the conversation is confined to three of them, for the fourth, a slight, wiry, though for his profession a somewhat tall man, stands silently chewing a flower. Impossible to mistake his vocation, even if the dandy top-boots and breeches failed to indicate it. He wears a light overcoat, with a flower in his button-hole ; nobody in summer time, at all events, ever saw Sam Burton without a flower in his button-hole, a very correct white hat, and neat light sporting scarf. This is Sam Burton, in his own estimation the finest horseman in England. His employers don't, perhaps, estimate him *quite* so highly, but they do think him equal to any, and superior to all not counted in the very first flight.

“Well, Darlington,” observed Luxmoore, “nothing could be more satisfactory, as far

as we can make out. You know the old horse well, and, therefore, we must take your dictum for it, having nothing to try with that's reliable."

"He's as fit and as well as ever he was in his life, sir, and win or no win he'll be very close at the finish."

"I hope so. I've backed him a raker, I tell you. Do you want to stand any of it? I don't quite know what the commission averages, but about nine or ten, I should think."

"I shall be very glad to have a hundred, or as much of it as you may choose to give me," replied the trainer, quietly.

"All right; you're on a hundred. Something like faith, this, Jim," said Luxmoore, laughing. "Now, Sam, do you want to have a bet?"

"If it's good enough for Mr. Darlington's hundred, sir, it ought to be good enough for my pony."

"All right, and now I'm off."

"Wait one minute," said the Honble. Jim. "How's it to be run, Darlington? Have you told him?"

"Yes, Sam knows," replied the trainer, quietly. "He's to come right through if they don't make a pace; the horse is very fit, very sound, and can make his own running; all Sam's got to do is to stand no nonsense."

Mr. Burton gave a slight nod, and remarked, "They wouldn't gammon him much, as he meant to have pretty well strangled them before they came round the turn for home."

"By the way, Darlington, suppose this doesn't come off?" suddenly exclaimed Luxmoore.

"I understand, sir," said the trainer; "if it doesn't, or nearly so, we know nothing about the youngsters. The stable clock don't keep time, and you'll have to buy something to try with."

"Well, Darlington," laughed Laceby,

"I'm like Mr. Luxmoore, going for the gloves on Shooting Star. We know he's properly wound up, and if he's not the timepiece you reckon him, as you say, we must have another."

The Honble. Jim's had been no sudden inspiration the day before, but quite an arranged part of the commission with Mr. Plyant. As that clever commissioner had said—"I've been dribbling it on the last two days, Mr. Luxmoore; don't you come to Tattersall's yourself, but let Mr. Laceby drop in a little before business is over, and close with the first big bet he gets a chance of, and take two or three points less, if need be, than I am haggling for."

Cyril Herrick had taken a house for the Ascot week, and was entertaining a very pleasant party there, of which Luxmoore, Laceby, and Mrs. Richeton formed part. They were staying some four miles from the course, and the programme was that they were to come over every day on

Herrick's drag. Mr. and Mrs. Florenstein and their daughter, a Captain Singleton of the Guards, and two other men about town, constituted the remainder of the assembly, and it was back to this drag that Luxmoore and the Honble. now made their way. Past the great fire-eater, shot with the last meteor direct from the Lord of the Heavens ; past the strong man, who breaks paving stones with his teeth ; past Annie of the Harp ; past the Duchess with her cards ; past the spangled-painted girl upon stilts ; past her of the tambourine, who styles herself the original "flying trapeze ;" on and through that curious, motley *mélange* that mop, mow, sing, and tumble round the drags and carriages at Ascot, the pair made their way, not wheedled out of their change by that last survivor of Trafalgar, any more than by the widow with ten children, who requests you to purchase a box of fusees for charity and the love of God—one generally buys them from different motives.

At last they arrive at the coach, and find Mrs. Richeton and Mrs. Florenstein enshrined on the box in their most bewitching toilettes. And no man could say but that Theodora Richeton was fair to gaze on that summer afternoon, in all the bravery of her silken robes and Worth's last dream in bonnets. Mrs. Florenstein, her particular friend, is a good-looking woman, though at least ten years her senior, but *bien conservé*, and got up with such consummate skill and taste that one can scarce believe her mother of the fair-haired girl behind her, to whom Cyril Herrick is paying such attention.

"Ah! here you are at last, Mr. Luxmoore," cried Mrs. Florenstein. "Charlie Singleton has gone into the ring to do his best for Theodora and me. We are bound to stand your colours to-day, mind. What are Darlington's latest words?"

"Short, but significant," replied Harold, laughing, as he jumped up on the drag,

behind Mrs. Richeton. "He says he should like to stand in a hundred."

"No; does he?" exclaimed Mrs. Richeton. "The black and crimson hoops are worth backing to-day. Margaret, don't you feel ashamed of our pitiful commission? Ha! Captain Singleton; what have you done for us?"

"Awful short price," replied the Guardsman, languidly. "Took a hundred to thirty for each of you, and took it three times for myself. Now, let's get up and see it run;" and, so saying, Singleton climbed up alongside Luxmoore.

"Here come the horses!" said Mrs. Richeton, and in an instant every glass on the drag was riveted on a great, powerful, plain-looking roan horse that bore the black and crimson hoops.

"He's ugly, Mr. Luxmoore; he always was," said Mrs. Florenstein, after a steady survey, as the roan paced quietly as an old hunter past the Stand. "But he does

Darlington credit ; he looks fit to run for his life."

"Not a handsome one, Harold," said Mrs. Richeton. "You know I never saw him before, but he looks as if he'd stay for a week. I should have guessed him slow."

"No, he has a fair turn of speed," replied Luxmoore, "and he can get a distance, which is something in these days."

"You've backed him to win a big stake ?" she said, inquiringly.

"Yes, we shall land over twenty thousand if it comes off, but, of course, there's Laceby and one or two others have a share."

Theodora Richeton made no reply. She could not wish him luck ; for her own sake she hoped he might lose. She was striving her utmost to win this man, and she could afford to overlook no calculation in the game she was playing. She fancied if money was scarce with him he would be

more likely to reflect that she was a well-dowered widow. She not only knew, but had seen with her own eyes, how complete was his estrangement from Grace Layton. As to how that had been brought about she not only never stooped to inquire, but gave Holt most clearly to understand these were minor considerations on which she desired no information. She was quite aware that Luxmoore had been a heavy loser at Epsom, and she had seen too much of racing not to know what a "plunging" Ascot means afterwards should it turn out disastrous, and it was quite visible to her that Harold meant "plunging" in good earnest this meeting. It was the first time since he had inherited the Grange Stud that he had had some of his own horses really worth backing.

"Not a taking horse this Shooting Star in his preliminary canter," thinks Mrs. Richeton, as she eyes him narrowly, and she says as much to her friend Mrs. Floren-

stein. But that lady, who had seen Shooting Star win upon more than one occasion, replies—

“No, he always lobs along in that fashion, but he goes in very different style when really extended.”

The horses are marshalled at the post, and in a few minutes they are away. Something in white leads, and the black and crimson hoops lie second. It is a very commonplace race indeed ; when they have got down the hill into the Swinley bottom the all white is done with, and Sam Burton, taking his horse at once to the front, brings his field along at a good pace, coming round the turn into the straight with a three lengths lead. Opposite the Stand he is challenged both on the right and left, but neither of his opponents ever succeed in getting up, and Sam Burton glides past the judge’s chair with a good two lengths in hand.

Up go the numbers. Quick flash the

telegraph wires, and in a few minutes half England will be aware that Mr. Luxmoore's Shooting Star has won the Ascot Stakes.

"What a *coup!* " cries Mrs. Florenstein; and everybody on the drag congratulates Harold.

Theodora murmurs "felicitations," and presses his hand.

Luxmoore enjoys all the triumphs of victory, sweet ever, gained however it may be.

"I say," remarks the ever-practical Laceby, "lunch is the thing now, you know. Look alive with the hampers, you fellows. Nothing ever makes one so consumedly thirsty as waiting for a good thing to come off. One always wants a lot of drink after it, whichever way it goes."

What a merry lunch it was on the top of that coach! Men, and ladies too, came up to pay their congratulations, and Herrick's hampers seemed equal to indefinite de-

mands. Reckless Charlie Singleton, it was true, had regrets that he had not stood the black and crimson hoops for another hundred, and Mrs. Richeton, as we know, had her own reasons for wishing things had been otherwise.

"And I suppose now, Mr. Luxmoore, we are to back Hypocrite for the Biennial. You told us last night, if Shooting Star won the Stakes, we ought," said Mrs. Florenstein.

"Certainly," replied Harold. "It shows us his trial horse is in form, and I mean to myself."

"Won't have that washy chestnut," said Laceby. "I'm prejudiced against him."

"Well, you'll see, Jim," retorted Luxmoore. "He'll have to meet a very good two-year-old if he goes down to-day."

But the Honble. shook his head, and betook himself to close and severe investigation of a pigeon pie that happened to be in his immediate vicinity. Shrewd and

strong-minded, the Honble. Jim, and not to be talked out of his opinion by any one. And in the mean time a pair of jealous eyes, in which the tears are nigh welling, are watching that drag through a pair of glasses from the opposite side of the course, and witnessing Harold Luxmoore's attentions to Mrs. Richeton during the lunch with a heart that is sore indeed. "It's all over," thought Gracie, "but I could hardly have believed that Harold would have so utterly ignored any note I might have sent him."

"Now, Mrs. Richeton, I'm off," exclaimed Luxmoore. "I'm going to back Hypocrite, and I tell you all fairly I recommend you to follow me once more."

Rapidly was the Guardsman charged with the ladies' commissions, and Charlie Singleton was keen as Luxmoore himself to get within the golden circle of Tattersall's enclosure.

"I don't mean to bet on anything else

to-day but this, Singleton," said Luxmoore, as they crossed the course, " and I mean to back this in earnest."

But they found layers somewhat cautious. It was rumoured that Hypocrite was a very smart colt, and the success of Shooting Star showed that the stable was in form. Harold was at once surrounded by a lot of the leading bookmakers, and it was only after considerable sparring that he succeeded in getting seven thousand to four laid him in one hand, upon which he abruptly closed his book, left the ring, and went across to confer with his trainer. Mr. Darlington congratulated his master upon his success, and upon being questioned about Hypocrite, said the colt couldn't be better, and, he thought, ought to win ; but when Harold told him of how he had backed the colt, he remarked it was a terrible lot of money to put on one who had never faced the starter, and upon being told he could have as much as he

fancied on the race, confined himself to taking a modest seventy to forty about Hypocrite's chance.

"You see," he said apologetically to his master, "it's not like trusting an old one. We know the best and the worst of him; besides which, the price is so short."

"What do you think of Hypocrite's chance, Mr. Laceby?" inquired Mrs. Richeton of the Honble. Jim, who lingered on the drag as if he had quite closed with racing for the day.

"I don't like him, and am afraid Harold will make a biggish hole in his winnings before another hour is over; but it's no use talking. I am going to sit here with you, and see what comes of it. The colt won a good trial, I know."

The backers of the black and crimson hoops mustered in such strength, that before Mr. McGeorge took the eleven runners for the Biennial in hand, seven to four on Hypocrite hardly found takers.

Two or three false starts and they are away. The colt is a good beginner, and before they have gone two hundred yards Sam Burton has obtained a commanding lead. From that out it was the veriest case of hare and hounds ever seen. Hypocrite spread-eagled his field, and ran home an easy winner by four or five lengths.

The exultation of the Herrick party may be imagined. This time Charlie Singleton, at all events, had nothing to reproach himself with. He had put down every bit of his Ascot Stakes winnings on the result, and felt that he had done his duty by himself and his creditors.

"I'm the only fool in the family, Harold," said Jim Laceby, as Luxmoore once more rejoined the drag, "the only faint-hearted one of the party, and I feel mean past conception. To think that washed-out-looking brute was such a galloper!"

But we cannot follow our party through

all the vicissitudes of an Ascot meeting. One more scene and I have done. It is the morning of the Cup day, the Cup *par excellence*. In the paddock, about an hour before the time fixed for the first race, two men might be seen strolling up and down in earnest conversation. Mr. Darlington, the trainer, was one; Mr. Plyant, the recognized commissioner of the Blithe-down stable, the other.

"It's a very bad com. to do, naturally," said the latter. "Of course, every one knows now this Coriolanus ain't at Ascot; and after the way Hypocrite won on Tuesday, I'm dashed if I know what they'll put him at for the New Stakes; but I reckon I shall be uncommon clever if I can get Mr. Luxmoore's five thousand on at evens."

"There's the 5lb. penalty," observed Mr. Darlington.

"Devilish lucky there is, or lay five to one on would be all I could hope to do;

but, Lord, win as he did on Tuesday, why,
10lb. wouldn't stop him."

"Well, I don't want anything on him
myself," said the trainer quietly.

"You don't mean to say anything's wrong
with him?" rejoined Mr. Plyant, lowering
his voice.

"No, the colt's as well as ever he was,
and—don't make any mistake—he'll win if
he can, and no nonsense about it; but I
don't fancy him."

"Why not?" inquired Mr. Plyant
bluntly.

"Did you see him run on Tuesday?"
inquired the trainer, in his turn.

"Yes."

"Very well, then; you ought to know as
much as I do. In the mean while just put
me a pony on The Felon. I hear that's a
goodish colt, and he gets the pull of that
5lb."

"The Felon! D—mme, I never heard
of him."

"Well, you do now, and, mind, I've my pony on;" and, this said, Mr. Darlington sat down on a bench, as if further conversation was too exhaustive in such weather.

The public were extremely put out at first to find that Coriolanus, of whom report spoke so highly, was not at Ascot, and that the Blithedown stable had elected to do battle with Hypocrite, despite his penalty, for the New Stakes. Still, the public argued, the stable must surely know, and really, looking at the way he won the Biennial on Tuesday, it is quite impossible to say how good he may be—points, these, often perplexing to the public. But when the public came to see how Luxmoore and the followers of Blithedown were plunging on Hypocrite, the pale chestnut became a very hot favourite. Even Jim Laceby had forsaken his prejudices, and was on the black and crimson hoops for an even monkey. Still, in spite of the great rush to back Hypocrite, there were three or four

colts that he had not met in the Biennial which were strongly supported, and, moreover, the more astute bookmakers did know how a penalty told up the Ascot Hill.

The favourite went like a bird in his preliminary canter, and nobody could look more satisfied with his mount than Sam Burton. Nothing galloped better than Hypocrite, though a few good judges thought there was a wear and tear look about The Felon, and argued he might chance to be a thorn in the favourite's side. A plainish-looking colt, but with wonderful thighs, and of that stamp that is never done with.

The roar of the ring is hushed, and all eyes and glasses are turned down the straight mile for the first appearance of the horses on the crest of the hill. That anxious eyes are bent there from the top of Herrick's drag, we may be sure. Sam Burton, following his Tuesday's tactics, is

first away, and rises the hill a good two lengths in advance of his field. He looks like sailing in alone, and already there is a cry of "Hypocrite wins!" but opposite the stand The Felon comes with a determined rush, and for a second a shout goes up that the favourite's beat; yet his opponent apparently fails to quite get up, and once more there's a roar of "Hypocrite wins!" But The Felon, running game as a bulldog, in his difficulties, comes again, and the favourite at the finish, unmistakably showing the white feather a little, is eventually beaten a neck.

The occupants of the drag, as a rule, take their reverse with much equanimity. If they have lost heavily upon this occasion, still they have no great cause to complain, being all fair winners yet, in spite of this last *contretemps*.

One only of the party drops from the roof disgusted, and that is Jim Laceby, who mutters *sotto voce* to himself, "Well,

of all the dashed fools ever heard of I'm the biggest."

"As I thought," murmured Mr. Darlington, who had watched the race carefully from a post of vantage. "I was sure I saw his ears go back when he heard the crack of the whips on Tuesday. He'll never win if he's fairly collared. It wasn't the weight stopped him."

"A very good race, indeed," remarked Mr. Plyant, as he glanced over his book, "thanks to Darlington's hint. He don't say much, but, by Jove, he knows a lot. Wonder how the dickens he heard of this Felon?"

CHAPTER VI.

WHAT ASCOT DID FOR THEM.

THERE was never an Epsom nor an Ascot yet that did not bring gloomy reflections to some people. Of course, there are the inscrutable problems, things that it was impossible to foresee ; but pondering over such tournaments afterwards, it always appears that our eyes ought to have been open to some of those events that brought such disaster upon us. It is always so, and to prophesy after the event is peculiarly easy. But there was no one so utterly ruined at Ascot as Gracie Layton. What is bankruptcy in purse compared to bankruptcy of the affections ? and no gambler of

the Ascot revel had “plunged” more thoroughly than Gracie. She had taken shame to herself for ever stooping to write that note to a man who had shown that he had forgotten her. She had kept it a secret even from her sister, because she felt it a humiliation no woman ought to descend to, and what had been the result? Harold had utterly ignored her presence on the course; had behaved as if he had no knowledge of her even being there. She could have wished her fingers blistered ere they had penned that letter; the tears came scalding hot in her eyes as she thought how she had exposed herself to Harold’s contempt, if not ridicule. How could she ever have been so utterly blinded as to his true character? That they might quarrel—well, yes, she could have thought that, though not probable, possible; that their engagement might come to be broken, also she could have deemed possible; but that Harold should have ever treated her

with cynical indifference—no, she could never have believed that. And yet she thought no man, with the ordinary feelings of a gentleman, could have altogether ignored that note.

It was evident to her now what was the whole secret of his conduct. Mrs. Richehton had regained her ascendancy, and Harold's treatment of herself was, probably, in obedience to the dictates of her rival. No doubt had Gracie on this score; for four days had Harold Luxmoore, so to speak, lived under her eyes. The Crawfurd-Peppletons' box was exactly opposite Herrick's drag, and with a fair pair of race glasses it was perfectly easy to note narrowly the proceedings of that party. It is easy to imagine the way a girl with good cause to feel jealous would interpret what she saw. There was the lover she deemed faithless to herself apparently paying the greatest devotion to the woman with whom his name had been so much

coupled just before she had made his acquaintance. How was she to guess that all the laughter and gaiety of that party, which she could palpably descry, was due simply to the success of their turf speculations? When Harold was urging Mrs. Richeton to have another glass of champagne, she pictured impassioned words whispered into her ear. When he was exhorting her to back Hypocrite, the girl's jealousy led her to interpret it in similar fashion, and she saw a downright proposal in a suggestion that the widow should try a mayonnaise. I should think a good many engagements would fall through if the pair could keep each other under such critical investigation for a month, and even, perhaps, the wife of our bosom is the better for not being focused too closely, while she, in her turn, may be the happier for not quite knowing everything about us.

It was impossible for Gracie to escape the keen eyes of her sister upon her return

home. The girl was too thoroughly miserable now to be able to keep the mask up any longer. Till this, all unpromising as things looked, she had suffered herself to hope; but now hope was dead within her. She admitted all was over between her and Harold before, but in her heart of hearts she had never believed it. Annie had contributed considerably to keep this belief alive in her. Annie's stubborn theory, that those letters of Harold's were not thoroughly his own, but dictated to some extent by another, had buoyed her up in this belief. But now, had she not seen with her own eyes? Was it not evident that Harold had utterly forgotten her? Was it not transparent that Mrs. Richeton reigned in her stead? I wonder whether three more fallacious words were ever put together in the English tongue than "seeing is believing." An afternoon with Maskelyne and Cooke would account for much belief of times gone by.

"I am afraid you had a dull time at Ascot, Gracie," said Miss Layton, on the former's return. "At all events, sister *mia*, you don't look well. Whether you've been bored, or doing too much, I don't know, but your outing don't seem to have benefited you."

"No ; how could it?" cried the girl, passionately. "I sat and suffered tortures for four days running. Sat and saw the man who stole my heart, and vowed he loved me, make love to another for four summer afternoons. Do you think the fires and faggots of Smithfield were much worse than that? At all events, they didn't last so long."

"What do you mean, Gracie?"

"Mean ! that I was pitiful enough, weak enough, debased enough, to write once more to Harold, and beg him to come and speak to me at Ascot, if only for a few minutes. You couldn't believe it, could you, that you had such a crawling,

spiritless wretch for a sister? but it is so. He treated me with the contempt I deserved. He never once cast an eye to our box, though I had told him where it was. I had the satisfaction of seeing him pay the most assiduous attention to Mrs. Richeton the whole meeting. I hate that woman!" concluded Grace, vehemently.

"I'm sorry you wrote to Harold, very," replied Miss Layton; "although I still believe he is labouring under some misconception concerning you. I confess this staggers me. Harold Luxmoore I hold a gentleman, and that he should neither answer your note, nor come and speak to you, I own puzzles me. I don't like his renewing his intimacy with Mrs. Richeton. We know, indeed you told me he admitted himself, that there was a pretty fierce flirtation between them at one time, and she's both a handsome and a clever woman, Gracie."

"No need to tell me that. I know all her advantages; she has wealth and freedom besides. What have I to put against it all? Nothing but his love, and that has betrayed me. He can marry her to-morrow, clogged with no conditions. I cannot blame him; but I could not believe he would have behaved to me as he has done. Don't talk, Annie," continued the girl, as the tears welled into her eyes. "I know I ought to be above crying about it, but I can't help it just now. The lesson has been sharp, but I shall get over it in a little. Leave me for a while; my head aches. Don't think me a greater fool than you can help; but I did love him very dearly."

"Yes, my darling, and do still, I'm afraid," replied her sister, soothingly. "I'm not going to counsel you to forget him all at once. It's not likely you can, Gracie; and though I would have you build no more hopes, I do still fancy in

days to come you will at least have the satisfaction of finding that his behaviour to you has justification in misunderstanding of some sort. I am loath to believe Harold could knowingly treat a woman as he has treated you."

Gracie gave her sister a grateful glance in reply. Wrathful as she felt with this lover of hers, woman-like, she rejoiced at hearing anything in his extenuation, weak and indefinite though it might be; but Annie, as she left her sister's room, did feel, spite of what she had said, that the rupture between Harold and Gracie admitted now of no further doubt as to its being both decided and final.

Down at Liddington there is much jubilation over the success of the black and crimson hoops. They rang the bells when the news came down that Blithedown had carried off the Stakes and the Biennial; and there was quite a little cluster in Nancy Hamper's bar-parlour that evening.

The weather did not admit, it is true, of a steamy bowl, but the buxom hostess was quite equal to the occasion, and manufactured a mighty pitcher of cold gin punch, that even Doctor Slocombe could find no fault with. Neither the doctor nor Mr. Calvert had been able to get away from their vocations to witness the triumph of the Luxmoore colours; but they had both dropped into the King's Head that evening to talk over the glories of the day.

"Well, doctor," said the stud-groom, with a chuckle, "we agreed we were sending Darlington something to deal with this time, didn't we? and we weren't altogether wrong, eh?"

"No; this is something like," replied the doctor, rubbing his hands. "Ha! ha! We shall make a pretty good bid for the Derby next year, eh, Calvert? We haven't shown 'em our best yet, I fancy. Very pleasant tipple, Mrs. Hamper; perhaps just one lump of sugar more than a prudent

man would administer ; but still, yes—I think I could just do another in honour of the occasion."

"None of your nonsense, doctor. You know the punch is as near perfection as may be," laughed Nancy Hamper, as she refilled her guest's glass.

" Didn't I say near ? " retorted Dr. Slocombe. " When we get within one lump of sugar of nectar, it should be near enough for us denizens of earth ; but don't you know, if I failed to put in my protest, you would add three or four more lumps of the fatal saccharine on the next occasion ? "

The landlady laughed, and, turning to Calvert, asked, "When will Blithedown make its next effort ? "

" That, ma'am, is a question you must put to the mysterious Mr. Darlington ; and if you do, I don't suppose you will be any the wiser. He's clever, Darlington, very ; but he's not open. One don't expect a trainer to go blabbing about the country

like a school-girl; but you have nothing effervescent in your bar, Mrs. Hamper, that is wired down anything like as close as Darlington. He never even condescended to tell me that he fancied the looks of Hypocrite; and only admitted Coriolanus was a nice colt."

"Lor!" said Mrs. Hamper, "the greatest beauty we've had in the paddocks for years!"

"No; he ain't enthusiastic, Darlington," retorted Mr. Calvert. He's pleasant to talk to, very; and I'm bound to admit he can turn 'em out fit, and know's what he's about; but he's rather more tightly corked than any one I ever came across."

"Well," said the doctor, judgmentally, "It's a fault the right side. A babbling hound's never any good, and we don't expect a trainer to be giving tongue about his horses. Still, I wonder he isn't a little more open with you, Calvert?"

"Naturally you'd suppose he would be;

but I suppose it's the man's nature, and, I'll not complain as long as he pulls off two good races for Liddington, as he did to-day. Mrs. Hamper, here's your health on the occasion."

"The same to you, Mr. Calvert, and hoping luck's turned, and that next year the bells will be ringing for Epsom."

The stud-groom's face lit up ; and Dr. Slocombe, jumping to his feet, said, with intense gravity—"Fill that glass once more, Mrs. Hamper, when you propose a toast of such magnitude."

"You'll swallow it, sugar and all, eh, doctor ?" cried the landlady, bursting into a merry peal of laughter, and promptly complying with his request.

"No levity, woman," retorted the doctor, with a twinkle in his eyes. "John Hamper, it's your duty to see your wife drinks this toast with the solemnity befitting it. Fill your own glass, John ; the occasion warrants it. Nancy's toast :

‘ May the bells of Liddington ring out for Epsom next year.’ ”

John Hamper indulged in a mighty guffaw, as was his wont, at the constant badinage between his wife and the doctor; and then they all drank with much hilarity to the victory of the black and crimson hoops on the Surrey Downs next May.

Mrs. Richeton’s gold had proved productive in Berkley’s hands. That gentleman knew he should be called to no account for the funds committed to his charge, and, though by no means neglecting his patroness’s interests, had used her money as it seemed best to him. Things had prospered with Berkley. He had played with much fortune at the “Hædulus,” and the Epsom that had proved so disastrous to his cousin, had been a very profitable race for him. We know that one of his ambitions had been to purchase that very horse that had won the New Stakes at Ascot. Although Berkley had

not succeeded in acquiring capital enough to buy *The Felon* outright, he had managed to purchase a share in him. *The Felon* was a colt in a "little man's stable." He was under the care of an ex-steeple chase jockey, who had resigned the saddle and set up as a trainer. The man understood his business, and at first got fair and profitable employment in the management of steeple chase studs, but Joe Milton was such an incorrigible rogue that master after master dismissed him in disgust. If they had a favourite, the redoubtable Joe could never resist selling that favourite's chance, and the horse invariably finished nowhere when expected to win. He now picked up a precarious living by training some four or five horses of his own, with some two or three very shady associates, running them principally at suburban meetings, and most thoroughly on the in and out principle ; that is to say, they won or lost exactly as the confederates thought

there was most money to be made out of them. How they had picked up *The Felon* it is difficult to say; and most assuredly they had paid no very long price for him. They had bought him with a view to running him as they did their other horses, and had no conception of how good a colt they had got hold of. He was entered for all sorts of races when he came into their hands, otherwise they would never have dreamt of flying at such high game as the New Stakes. In fact, had it not been for Berkley Holt's buying that share in him, the probability is he would never have been sent to Ascot.

But Berkley had conceived a great fancy for the colt the very first time he set eyes on him, and Berkley really was a judge of a race-horse. A rough gallop at home told them the young one was smart, but they had nothing in the stable with which to really test him. Holt, ever sanguine, and just then in command of funds, in-

sisted upon it that he should try his luck at Ascot. His confederates were more inclined to wait, and keep the colt for something of much less importance, but they were overruled at last by Berkley, and, in consequence, not only landed a very good stake, but awoke to the fact that they were really in possession of a probably first-class horse. They knew that The Felon had not been thoroughly at his best at Ascot, and how good he might turn out in the future it was impossible to say. A little firm of this kind is wont to indulge in a multiplicity of names, and every one of the knot had an assumed name registered. "Mr. Podmore's The Felon" conveyed very little information to either the ring or the public, and even that astutest of bookmakers, Mr. Plyant, had not the slightest idea who Mr. Podmore might be. But Mr. Plyant did know, before Ascot terminated, who The Felon's trainer was, and noted him as a horse that

it would be more prudent to lay against than to back, as a rule. As for the firm that owned the colt, they were much perturbed in their minds at present, as to which way they could make the most of this nugget they had so unexpectedly discovered, and discussed the pros and cons with much greediness and acerbity.

It was through Mr. Larcher that Holt had first formed the acquaintance of Messrs. Milton & Co., and in the early days of his connection with them, Berkley had no idea that Larcher was mixed up in their concerns. It was only of late he had discovered that the attorney was a power in the confederacy, and that there was little dissent from his dictum when he chose to forcibly express it. Mr. Larcher, indeed, was the mythical Podmore; and, as we have already seen, it was from a very different motive the attorney had negotiated those bills of his from that which Berkley had supposed. Mr. Larcher,

in fact, though he made money in all sorts of nefarious ways, perhaps got more out of the turf than in any other. He was fond of buying men. What I mean is, that where he ever fancied a man could be of use to him, Mr. Larcher was always ready to advance just as much money as he thought would place his victim completely in his power. Milton, and his two or three rascally associates, were completely under the money-lender's thumb, and he had taken most especial care to make them thoroughly comprehend it. They hated him with peculiar fervour, but they were equally afraid of him. They felt that reverence for his keen subtle brain that the minor conspirators always feel for the arch-plotter, while his ruthless animosity against any one who attempted to deceive him, and which they had all witnessed, made them very diffident about playing tricks with Mr. Larcher.

Berkley Holt had rapidly acquired an

immense ascendancy in this confederacy. They recognized an intellect superior to their own, combined with unscrupulousness and audacity that went even beyond themselves. He sneered at the petty robberies by which they got their livelihood, and advocated the playing for higher stakes. "Bah!" he had said, contemptuously, before Ascot—"You pick up a few hundreds when you might make thousands. Fortune has thrown a trump card into our hand in The Felon! Let us play the bolder game, and run him for the New Stakes." They had done so, and it had been a bigger *coup* than they had landed yet. Another thing, too, which carried much weight in their eyes—Berkley was not in the least afraid of Larcher. They were all, more or less, in his power. Holt, apparently, was not, and dictatorial as the attorney would occasionally be with them, he was always quite the reverse with Berkley. Mr. Larcher, as we know, had

tried the experiment of letting the latter feel the curb, and found, to his dismay, that the bit was not altogether in his mouth. Moreover, the attorney had a great belief in Berkley's shrewdness connected with turf matters, and with some reason. It was shrewdness, indeed, that the world generally would, probably, characterise by another epithet; but the term is euphonistic, and much in vogue amongst the banditti of both the race-course and Stock Exchange. If not so picturesque in their attire as they were in the Middle Ages, I fancy the freebooters of our century are infinitely more expert in the art of flaying the innocents that may fall into their hands. Civilization does much for us, especially in the art of stripping our fellow-creatures, and one really does feel unmitigated contempt for the Italian brigand when one thinks of such magnificent conceptions as those of the Bidwells, etc.

When we leave a race-course with a

very handsome balance to our own side the ledger, we are usually fairly satisfied with the results of our speculations, to say the least of it. Nobody had ever heard the Honble. Jim make moan when the war went against him; and yet, though he had won a good deal of money at Ascot, the Honble. was extremely dissatisfied with things in general. In the first place, he had never left off upbraiding himself for giving up his own original opinion, and turning round and backing Hypocrite for the New Stakes. It was not the money; no one could take a reverse with more utter *nonchalance* than Jim Laceby, and upon this occasion it was nothing of the kind; but he was angry with himself for not adhering to his own opinion concerning the "washed-out one," as he persistently termed him. Secondly, he began to have a dim idea that there was something very wrong about Luxmoore's engagement. Harold never opened his lips on

the subject ; nor when he called in Grosvenor Gardens were the Laytons more communicative. He knew, of course, the difficulty Mr. Layton had made ; and, for the first time, it had been really brought home to the Honble. Jim that Oliver Luxmoore's will was a stringent fact, and not a mere request. Harold did not go to the house—was no longer seen riding with the sisters. Well, Mr. Layton's prohibition would account in some measure for that, though Jim Laceby thought, if all was right, it was odd that Luxmoore should be so extremely punctilious on the latter point. But it struck him as curious the complete silence observed on either side concerning the engagement. Laceby was much attached to Harold, and he liked the sisters extremely. He had thought it a marriage that promised to be a very happy one ; and had been as near angry as it was possible for him to arrive at when he first heard of Mr. Layton's objection

to it. He told Harold that he really couldn't make up his mind as to which was the biggest fool of the two, his uncle or his proposed father-in-law ; but wound up by remarking that no man alive could continue in such an absurd phase of mind.

Laceby had observed Mrs. Richeton and Luxmoore pretty closely during that Ascot week, and he came round to exactly the opinion he had held eighteen months before, that the lady was in earnest, whatever Luxmoore might be ; and that Theodora Richeton was a woman who would be very likely to carry her point in such a matter.

CHAPTER VII.

DONCASTER.

THE few weeks between Ascot and Goodwood glide rapidly away, and Grace Layton catches but some fleeting glimpses of her faithless lover. Once or twice she has marked his presence in the stalls at the opera ; she has caught sight of him in the midst of all the fierce turmoil of a polo match at Hurlingham ; he has raised his hat now and again in the course of the morning's ride in the Row ; and, bitterest of all, she has seen him on one occasion driving in the afternoon with Mrs. Riche-ton. The girl has no manner of doubt now about his falsity, and upbraids herself

sorely that she cannot tear him from her heart; but although love can turn to bitter hatred upon occasion, it is not always so, and at all events Grace Layton is fain to confess with burning blushes that she loves this man yet, shamefully as he is behaving towards her. Often she manœuvres to talk matters over with her sister, but that young lady has grown strangely reticent of late, and declines to give her the comfort for which her soul thirsts. Whatever she may think, Annie carefully abstains now from promulgating her opinion that Harold is labouring under a misconception that will some day be set right. It is not that her opinions have changed, but she does not feel justified in feeding her sister with hopes that may prove nugatory. She is somewhat staggered, too, by this prominent re-appearance of Mrs. Richeton on the scene, for, not being in love with Harold Luxmoore, nor credited with being engaged to him, she is enabled to push her

inquiries to a much greater extent than Gracie, and has no difficulty in ascertaining that Harold is to be seen constantly about with Theodora Richeton. Miss Layton has caught scraps of gossip besides, and knows that many of society's detective police have decided that the old love will overcome the new. Without abandoning her previous opinion of the situation altogether, Annie is compelled to admit now that it is a misunderstanding that may probably be cleared up too late. She feels that it would be cruel to buoy her sister up any longer with those sanguine theories of hers. She knows how thorough and complete is Gracie's love. It wants no nourishing ; if it is to die it will die quite sufficiently hard without the kindly aid of physicians to prolong the death struggle. So she decides to watch, wait, and keep silence.

Goodwood is past and gone, Parliament is up, those who can afford the luxury are

grouse shooting. The Sussex fortnight is over, and the world is disporting itself at the seaside. Boulogne is crowded, for “the plunging” has been heavier than usual, and backers have had a sickly time of it. Still, the French watering-place is anything but a city of mourning; though the beaten and broken muster thick, there are no clouds athwart their brows. They may lack money to settle in England with either bookmaker or creditor, but their pockets teem with gold for a little *baccarât* amongst themselves. How do they do it? I don’t know; but these sore-stricken ones invariably seem to have plenty of loose cash for wine, cigars, billiards, or a little “unlimited.” The tribes are collected at Brighton, which, it is fair to conclude, will be the muster-place for the English contingent, before the final gathering of the chosen people. Half the theatrical world are at Scarborough, while Ramsgate and Broadstairs are literally strewn with chil-

dren. The Laytons are still lingering on the banks of the Thames, at their Richmond villa, and Annie has contrived to make out that Harold Luxmoore and his set are all located at "the Grand" in the famous Yorkshire watering-place, camped there pleasantly for the York and Doncaster meetings. A largish party, so ran Miss Layton's information, but of whom it consisted exactly she had failed to ascertain.

Luxmoore has persuaded Laceby, Herrick, and some more of his intimates to take their six weeks of the sea at Scarborough this year. "We shall have the interlude of York, you know, and then we shall see how Blithedown does at Doncaster. Win or lose, we will all come down afterwards to Liddington, and give the partridges a dusting; but I hope we shall have a good time on the 'Town Moor.'" York races passed over without much detriment to the party. Luxmoore

had no horses there, and neither himself nor his friends won or lost to any great extent. The followers of the black and crimson hoops held themselves in reserve, for it was no secret that Blithedown would be strongly represented at Doncaster, and already Coriolanus was credited with the Champagne Stakes. It is curious how high a reputation a two-year-old sometimes achieves before running, and it always seems enhanced by delay in producing him ; some grounds for this latter, as it is matter of history that of the most notable race-horses, not a few have made their *début* at Newmarket in October, just before the expiration of the season.

Doncaster comes at last, with all the roar and hullabaloo that accompanies the great Yorkshire Carnival. From Leeds, from Liverpool, from all Yorkshire, Cheshire, and Lancashire swarm in the crowds. From the Eastern Counties they descend thick as locusts at “the Shakespeare

siding," hungry and thirsty, ravening for meat, drink, and a bet upon the Leger. The waiters and barmaids at the Reindeer wear the steady resolute faces of men before a great battle ; they know that in the coming week, life for them will resolve itself into a perpetual fusillade of demands for sherry, bitters, brandy, soda, etc. ; that they will be appealed to for information about everything ; from what is to win the Leger, to what is the next train for Stourton-in-the-Marsh. The extraordinary ignorance of the outside or non-racing crowd about what they have come to see, how they are to see it, and what horses have a chance of winning, is a thing past all comprehension. The writer, this year, heard a portly-looking gentleman, with all the appearance of a small though well-to-do tradesman, consult one of the police at Ascot, with much solicitude, as to what would win the Hunt Cup, and evidently considered that constable's professions of

ignorance concerning it were to be more attributed to official reticence than want of knowledge. The High Street is surging with ever-advancing and receding currents of humanity, while about the steps of the Subscription Room the crowd heaves and breaks like the surf on a rock-bound shore, in its terrible anxiety to know what is the latest betting on the Leger, and "What price are they laying about this Coriolanus for the Champagne?" Opposite the Salutation are gathered a little knot of men, all unmistakably connected with horse-flesh; the rather tight trouser, the knowing gaiter, the neat butcher or trimly-laced boot, the longish waistcoat, the hats low-crowned, close-shaved, and that indescribable air that seems inherent to most of those interested in horses pervades them. They are discussing a fact, which, though well known to themselves, has not, as yet, got further down town. At the Salutation things are wont to leak out a little previous to their becoming town-talk.

"Noat brought Cooriolanus," says a burly Yorkshireman; "they mun think a deal of that coalt if they can afford to keep him laid up in lavender this way. Dal it all, the Champaagne's too good a stake to pass by, I'm thinking."

"Just so, Mr. Brufton, just so; but it don't follow altogether that they mean passing it over," said a shrewd South-countryman. "Darlington don't want anyone to teach him, and if he does it's a leetle unfortunate for him, because he'll have to look round a good deal."

A grin greeted this sally from the circle. The trainer was well known, either personally or by repute, to most of them, and was by no means deemed wanting in understanding of his business.

"He's brought a couple, anyway," continued the Southerner, "that are in the Champagne, and they beat anything in the North for a hundred."

"Done!" roared the Yorkshireman.

“The Felon beats the Blithedon horses for a hoondred. Put it doon, mon, put it doon.”

“All right,” said the South-countryman, quietly, as he pencilled it in his betting-book. “I didn’t know The Felon was here even.”

“Nor do I,” said his antagonist, “but I know he will be.”

“And that his party fancy him,” rejoined the other carelessly.

The Yorkshireman winked pleasantly as he added—“If you wait, mon, till his owners tell you, you woont back The Felon a deal till he changes honds. They doan’t run horses for the public, those chaps.”

Gradually the people began to stream—slowly, but steadily—up the pretty High Street, past the big shady avenue that leads on to the Town Moor, where fanatics, in greasy black, saffron-coloured linen, with bulbous and high-coloured noses, are

exhorting the passers-by to pause on their way to perdition ; where ringing the peg has its votaries, where the mysterious ball for ever wanders through the Lilliputian wicket without lowering one of the diminutive stumps, where the cocoa-nuts are so difficult to fetch off their sticks, and where the King of Clubs is so hard to pick out of only three cards. Past these traders in cant and chicanery, Yorkshire and her visitors wend their way to that classic sward that saw "the mighty Dutchman" go down before Voltigeur, and witnessed the exposure of that well-named impostor, Pretender, in the triumphant though well-nigh dying flicker, of "the cherry;" a colour which should be renowned in Doncaster history, if it were only for that famous Cup Day, when out of seven races on the card, five, including the Cup, fell to the cerise and black cap—such vengeance for a Leger disappointment as was never taken before nor since.

In the paddock, some little distance apart from the crowd, on the opening day of this Doncaster meeting, Harold Luxmoore is talking with somewhat undisguised impatience to Mr. Darlington.

"I cannot understand," he exclaims, "you're not having brought Coriolanus. You told me he would be about fit, and surely it would be as well to pick up the Champagne as not. The colt ought to begin to do something for his hay and corn."

"I apologise, sir," replied the trainer, quietly. "There was no time to write, and I mistrust telegraphs. The fact is, it would be quite against your interest to show him up here; he is not quite ripe. He would have to meet The Felon, and, mark me, sir, that's a good colt. He's the only one out this year I really care about getting the length of."

"Well, why not do it?" cried Luxmoore, impatiently.

"I have brought Hypocrite again to get another feeler ; as there is no giving away weight this time, and it is an easy course, I think we might just score. We've got Beggarmān to make running, and from the Red House in is like a bowling-green. Ascot showed us that Hypocrite is not very game, but I've a notion that if he comes with one run at the last he'll about win, and I thought we'd keep Coriolanus for the Middle Park Plate."

Luxmoore was not a bit satisfied with his clever trainer's tactics, albeit their shrewdness was quite apparent to him. Despite the heavy interests he had at stake, he disliked foregoing the glory of winning, and the Champagne at Doncaster was too famous a two-year-old contest not to feel an ambition about seeing it credited to his name in the *Calendar*.

"And I'm to back Hypocrite?" he said, moodily, at last.

"I can say nothing further than that the

horse is extremely well," rejoined Mr. Darlington, sententiously. In his own mind he felt somewhat injured by this last question. He was conscious of having displayed an almost unparalleled amount of candour and openness concerning his charges to their owner, and yet that gentleman was still apparently "wanting to know." It really, he thought, was hopeless to go into explanation with any one so devoid of understanding as he now deemed Harold Luxmoore. It was rather a favourite dictum of Mr. Darlington's, that, having once made him aware of the scale on which they desired their speculations to be conducted, his employers had much better leave the management of their finanical operations to himself. It was a theory, I need scarcely say, that he had never suggested, but he believed in it firmly, as men will do in their own theories, when they are of much more moon-stricken conception than those of the practical

Blithedown trainer. He'd a theory or two besides on the budding of roses, that he would have been delighted to discuss at any time, but Doncaster, in its Leger week offered but little opportunity. Doncaster, in short, upon that occasion is not given to discussion of any kind wherin you are not prepared to back your opinion, and to bet upon flower-growing generally, roses in particular, is a desecration of floriculture I trust we may never arrive at.

In the ring, the interest on the Champagne Stakes waxes hot. It is a moot point as to whether The Felon or Hypocrite is the better favourite. The former is a North-country-bred horse, and that fact, coupled with the recollection of what the horse did at Ascot, makes Yorkshire very resolute in his support. The Southerners, on the contrary, consider, that upon even terms, and over such an easy course as Doncaster, Hypocrite will run clean away from his opponent. They dwell much, more-

over, on the news now buzzed around, that he has a stable companion to make running, instead of having to make it for himself, as was the case at Ascot, and also are they much impressed with the well-accredited rumour that his owner has taken two thousand to one about him. The two favourites, indeed, are both backed for heaps of money, while ten to one goes begging about anything else. About the immediate followers of The Felon it is certainly difficult to arrive at what they may be doing. Nobody seems to know precisely who they are; while who is the veritable owner of the colt is a problem that exercises the reporters considerably. It is not that there is not plenty of information to be obtained upon that point—quite the reverse; they have been told that he belongs to a chemist at York, a farmer in the East Riding, a tobacconist at Hull, a brewer at Leeds, etc. Information is a plant that thrives amazingly on a race-

course. The people that know are invariably immensely in excess of the people who don't ; and yet, that little minority that knows nothing, but so obstinately lays against everything, how it thrives !

Berkley Holt is here, and once more within the enclosure. Berkley has prospered ever since that interview with Mrs. Richeton ; he has compromised with his turf creditors, and on payment of so much in the pound down, and a profusion of promises for the future, they have consented to withdraw the interdict under which he had for some time lain. He backs *The Felon* with considerable determination ; for he and his confederates, after an animated discussion, have decided that this time, at all events, the colt shall run upon his merits. Berkley has pointed out to them that the sooner they bring their horse to either a long or short price for next year's Derby the better. "Nothing to be done with him while he's at an

intermediate price," quoth Mr. Holt. "Let him be a strong favourite, and we can lay against him, or at an outside price we can back him, and be guided by circumstances afterwards as to which way we play our cards. Let him win this time, if he can; and I've little doubt he can." So, Messrs. Holt & Co. backed the mysterious Mr. Podmore's Felon, short though the odds were, to win themselves a niceish stake.

The Honble. Jim, standing out upon the course to see the horses go down in their preliminary canters, suddenly finds himself shoulder to shoulder with the Blithedown trainer.

"How are you, Darlington?" said Laceby. "Upon my word, Hypocrite does you credit. I never saw a horse in better trim. If he don't reverse the Ascot running to-day, he never will. He stole down in his canter as if he meant mischief all over."

"He's very well, sir; still I hope Mr.

Luxmoore hasn't been too sanguine, but borne in mind that he's not a glutton if it comes to a pinch."

"No," replied Jim, drily. "No, certainly not a glutton. I never saw one with less appetite for a ding-dong finish. I fancy Luxmoore's backed him pretty stiffly; but I must have a bet. See you again later, I dare say, Darlington," and so saying, Laceby dashed back into the ring, and was lost in that seething vortex.

Mr. Darlington meanwhile makes his way quietly to the open stand, immediately behind the winning-post, and, while awaiting the result, meditates gravely over what he deems the unparalleled folly of his employer. "I tell him a horse, that he must know to be a coward, is very well, and that if the race is run to suit him, I think he'll about win, and, according to Mr. Laceby, he considers that good enough to plunge on. It's madness; how's one to work for a master like that? Well, I suppose it's no

business of mine ; but I hate to see any one in the stable make an exhibition of himself, which, if Hypocrite turns it up to-day, is about what Mr. Luxmoore will have done."

" Give us just an inch or two, and I shall do," exclaimed a voice just below him. " Thank you, gentlemen. Ah ! Darlington, you here ? " continued Laceby, as he adjusted his glasses. " I've got a pony on the black and crimson hoops after all."

" That's all very well, sir," returned the trainer, laughing. " I've got a little on Hypocrite myself; but it's not good enough to back for a big stake."

" Nor yet for a small one, in my opinion. I'm not standing Hypocrite," replied Laceby.

" I understood you to say you were going for the black and crimson hoops, sir," replied Darlington.

" So I am ; but I've backed the other."

" What ! Beggarman ? "

"Yes; has he any chance?" rejoined Jim, laconically.

"Why, he's only going to make running, if he can, for Hypocrite," returned the trainer.

"Hypocrite's a rank cur. I lost my money over him at Ascot, and have hated him ever since. Beggarman finishes in front of him for a sovereign."

"Done, sir," replied Mr. Darlington.

"By Jove! that's a bad break away," remarked Laceby, whose glasses were now riveted on the Red House. "Hypocrite's got no manners. He's come nearly half the course before Sam Burton could stop him. He was better behaved at Ascot."

"Yes; he wants easing a bit. The work's telling on his temper, and he's been rather fretful of late. He's a rare good beginner though, and that is just what *The Felon* is not."

"Bad-tempered, speedy, and soft, eh? Just what a washy chestnut is likely to be.

Halloo! this looks like being a start; they're well together now. Yes, by Jove! they're off!"

Clang goes the bell, and the field for the Champagne comes streaming away from the Red House post.

"What's leading, sir; Beggarman, isn't it?" asked Darlington, who had no glasses.

"No; Hypocrite," rejoined Laceby. "He was first away. Ha! Sam's pulled him back now to let the other cut out the work. He'd better have come right along with him, I fancy. Beggarman, though, is doing his devoir gallantly. He can gallop a bit, that colt, Darlington."

"The Felon's on the far side, isn't he?"

"Yes; and going well. He and Hypocrite are both creeping up now on either side of Beggarman."

Half-way up the distance The Felon shot to the front, and it was speedily evident that Beggarman was in trouble, though running with great determination in his

difficulties. Opposite the Stand, Burton came with a tremendous rush, and for a moment, amid a roar of "Hypocrite wins!" he headed The Felon; but he died away in the next few strides, and The Felon ran in an easy winner by a length and a half, Beggarman beating his stable companion for second honours by a neck.

" You're right, Mr. Laceby," said the trainer, as he handed the Honble. a sovereign. " Hypocrite's not a very safe one to back, but he'd have done better if Sam had come right through with him. However, that's my fault; he rode the race as I told him to. The tactics were wrong."

" But the result would have been the same any way; the best horse won."

" I fancy so," replied Mr. Darlington, as he walked away to look after his charges.

Except that old Shooting Star won the Cup, the followers of the black and crimson hoops had by no means a roseate time at

Doncaster, and Luxmoore and his friends took wing for Liddington with considerably attenuated note cases. Berkley Holt and his coadjutors, on the contrary, departed with radiant countenances and swollen purses. Fortune does not always favour the virtuous in this world, more especially in racing.

CHAPTER VIII.

MISS LAYTON'S COMMISSION.

IT was a great game year, and Harold Luxmoore's guests had good sport over stubble and turnip field, bringing to hand many brace of birds and a goodly collection of hares to boot. More than once Jim Laceby wondered if any recollection of last year was recalled to Harold by their relentless war against the partridges. Did he ever look back upon that time when the old Grange was all alive with the rustle of silks and satins; when the shooting luncheon was always graced with a contingent of fair faces, and rendered more palatable by the soft prattle of female tongues, by

the low mellow ripple of women's laughter. The Honble. had inveighed then against the waste of time, and declared that women out shooting were a grand mistake, but he was fain to admit now that the luncheons were not half so mirthful as those of last season, and that, though the bags may be bigger, there is a lack of the fun and "go" that characterised the sport of last autumn. As for Harold, there is no reason to upbraid him with lack of keenness at present; he sticks to it with untiring energy, and seems to find no day too long or too fatiguing; but Laceby remarks, as do some other of his associates, that he takes his pleasure grimly now-a-days. "He's all wrong," mused the Honble. Jim; "there's a deuce of a hole in the ship somewhere. Harold Luxmoore used to be the brightest, cheeriest fellow a man ever shot with, and now he goes in at the partridges in as saturnine fashion as a rigid descendant of the old Covenanters, or a

Sixty Indian in the war-party might do; takes his part silently, and shows no positive interest in anything but making Curious too, he never mentions the Laytons and didn't even volunteer a message to Grace when I told him I was going on to Laiday to-morrow. Sir Arthur Henshaw was right when he came to the conclusion that it was a sanguineous tumult. I wonder what has gone wrong about that engagement. One can't ask, but there's a pretty considerable hint somewhere. The Layton people are as silent about it, too, as Hamlet. Why did Layton feel constrained to make such an everlasting fool of himself? they would have suited us well, and a nice, clever, sensible wife like Grace would have just been the making of him. Well, I suppose it's all over. When a man makes a fool of himself or pretends it's honourable like an early Christian, he feels it incumbent on him to be fayed alive sooner than

repudiate his opinions, and I've no doubt old Layton is all ready for martyrdom."

Not a word says Harold about the Laxby people as he bids his friend farewell, and the Honble. Jim departs not a little puzzled and perturbed about the whole affair. He cannot make out, for the life of him, how matters stand. Is he likely to hear anything from the Layton girls, he wonders. He is received at Laxton with all the wonted warmth and cordiality with which the family has ever welcomed him ; but not the slightest reference is made as to where he has come from ; not the faintest allusion to Liddington, or Harold Luxmoore, escapes the lips of any member of the Laxton circle. Not till he gets to the smoking-room does he hear his late host mentioned, and then Jim feels called upon to interfere in sharp authoritative fashion. Dick Layton had commenced indulging in a vague diatribe against Harold, when the Honble. Jim curtly interrupted him.

"Just recollect, Luxmoore happens to be an intimate friend of mine, before you go any further; and remember, that I shall act for Harold as I conceive he would for himself if he were sitting in this chair," observed Laceby in his usual languid tones, but the effect was decided. Nobody ever doubted the Honble. Jim when he, so to speak, put his foot down. There was more than one story afloat of his *sang froid* and determination, and Dick Layton abruptly changed the conversation.

The Honble. was lounging the next morning on the terrace beneath the drawing-room windows, lazily smoking and waiting till he should be apprised that the shooting party was ready to start, when Annie Layton stepped through one of the aforesaid windows, and said—

"Mr. Laceby, will you do me a favour?"

"Of course. What is it?"

"I want to have a talk with you here. Make some excuse, please, for not joining the shooting till later."

"Certainly. I'll tell them I haven't collected my ideas; or haven't laced my boots; or, simplest of all, that I won't come for an hour."

"I'll leave all that to you," replied Annie, with a faint smile; "but, remember, I want you."

"Wait here, and I'll be back in a few minutes. I'd better let them know at once that they are to start without me."

Laceby was back again in a very short time, and found Miss Layton pacing the terrace with swift, regular tread. "Mr. Laceby," she exclaimed, abruptly, "You are a most intimate friend of Harold Luxmoore's. You have just come from Liddington. I want to know if he ever mentions my sister's name to you?"

"Never now; and has not for some months."

"You know that all is over between them?"

"I have fancied so latterly, but till this

moment I was not aware positively that such was the case," replied Laceby.

"In short, you have not the faintest idea what has induced him to treat her so shamefully as he has."

"Stop a moment," rejoined the Honble. Jim. "I am in utter ignorance, remember, of all that has taken place ; but Harold is a dear friend of mine, and I can hardly believe that you are justified in speaking thus of him."

"I had flattered myself," replied Annie, "that we also were friends of yours, and that it would be possible to speak to you about this affair with the feeling that you would do justice to either side."

"You do me much honour to consider so, and I can conscientiously say that you make no mistake in thus regarding me ; but I am in total ignorance of everything connected with the rupture between them."

"And it is equally incomprehensible to Gracie and myself. Am I wrong in be-

lieving that Harold did honestly love my sister?"

"Most certainly not; and further, if you ask me, I would say that Harold Luxmoore is a very unhappy man about something or other this minute."

"He has Mrs. Richeton to console him, I am given to understand."

"He has been about with Mrs. Richeton a good deal of late, I grant. You see she goes racing, and they are old friends, but I don't think there is any chance of his consoling himself in the way you hint at."

"What could induce him to write Gracie those abominable letters?" observed Annie, musingly.

"As of course I have not, nor could not, see the letters," rejoined Laceby, meaningly, "it is impossible to give an opinion."

Miss Layton paused for some moments, and the pair paced on in silence. Annie was thinking what she had best do. She had made up her mind that if the mis-

understanding that she held to have taken place between Harold and her sister really was such, it was only to be cleared up through the mediation of Laceby. To show him the letters never had entered her head; and he might have spared himself that vigorous intimation that he would decline to look at them, and yet without, it was difficult to make the Honble. Jim entertain her view of the case.

"Mr. Laceby," she said at length, "you may perhaps think it absurd, but I believe Harold's letters to have been dictated by some one else."

"Can't think that possible for a moment," rejoined the Honble. Jim, dogmatically. "We are pretty stupid, a good many of us, and I dare say don't write very grammatically, and all that, but we don't call in our friends to write our love-letters, you know."

"Still, I stand to my opinion, that Harold's letters were inspired by somebody else."

"I'm awful sorry about the whole business," rejoined Laceby. "As you know, I thought Gracie and Harold just suited for one another, but I can't adopt your theory. If a man can write at all, depend upon it he does his own love-letters, whatever else he may leave to his secretary; besides, Harold always conducts his own correspondence."

"I wish very much I could get at it for a fact that Harold wrote those letters without any one dictating to him what he should say."

"Excuse me, Miss Layton, but this is the wildest conception I ever heard of," said Laceby, pausing abruptly. "Whatever Harold has written, by that you must judge him; you, or rather Miss Gracie, may have misjudged him. You think a woman dictated these letters?"

"No," replied Annie, "I don't; they are the work of a man, if I am at all right in my conjecture."

"Then, Miss Layton, I regret to say that I think you are all adrift in your conjectures, and that Harold must be judged by what his pen has said. That he should have behaved ill to your sister I must own beats my comprehension, for he most assuredly was most genuinely in love with her this time last year."

"And you don't think Mrs. Richeton has re-established her former influence over him?"

"Decidedly not. Good friends I should say again, but certainly nothing more."

"I know I'm right about those letters," exclaimed Annie, with womanly persistency, "but how to solve the mystery I cannot see. Will you help me, Mr. Laceby, if in your power?"

"Most assuredly, if you can point out how: but I must reiterate my opinion that you are labouring under a mistake."

"If you could have read those letters, and read them from a woman's point of

view, you would say otherwise. Let me think. Let us walk up and down for a few minutes while I try to think of what can be done."

Once more they paced the terrace silently, Jim Laceby wondering what could have occasioned the rupture that it was now patent had taken place between Gracie and Harold. He attributed it in nowise to any influence of Theodora Richeton, but fancied that it was much more likely, in the face of Mr. Layton's determined rejection of his suit, that Harold had thought it wisest to put an end to his engagement. That a man could be deemed to have behaved badly by the lady and her friends, under such circumstances, was very possible, without his having been guilty of any gross misconduct after all ; and such was the view Laceby now took of the whole business. He was sorry it was so, but if Mr. Layton insisted upon maintaining his original position, one

could hardly throw stones at Harold Luxmoore for pleading release from his engagement.

"I think I see a way of testing the veracity of my theory, Mr. Laceby," said Annie Layton in a low voice at last. "Are you *preux chevalier* sufficient to obey my hest if I give you a commission?"

"I will do your bidding with the greatest possible pleasure, if you have any idea it can bring together Harold and your sister. I'll own to feeling grieved about their rupture, and, wrong though I hold you in your reading of the case, will do whatever you may wish, without reference to my own judgment."

"You are indeed a true friend, Mr. Laceby," replied the girl, extending her hand to him with a bright smile; "and whether I'm wrong or right, I can never forget how loyal you have been to us in this affair."

"But what is it you want me to do?"

said the Honble. Jim, as he pressed the little hand extended to him."

"To go back to Liddington from here," replied Annie.

"A little awkward, but no matter—what next?"

"Ask Harold if he ever got a note from Gracie, asking him to come and speak to her at Ascot."

"Gad! I should think not, if he didn't come. I was there with him, and can answer for it; he never mentioned your sister's name. I didn't myself know she was there."

"You will ask him that question, then?"

"Certainly. Anything more."

"Yes. I know I can trust you. If he did *not* get that note, find out if you can whether he still entertains any feeling for Gracie. If he did get it, don't ask another question. Consider the whole business as utterly finished. One thing more; remember, this is between you and me; that Gracie is in utter ignorance of it."

"I understand," replied Laceby. "When I leave you, I will go back to Liddington, and you shall know the result of my investigations at once."

"Thank you so very much," replied Annie. "You must not shorten your visit here by an hour, recollect. It is so rarely we can entrap you, that we cannot afford that, and of course this is a matter about which there is no immediate hurry."

"Quite so," replied the Honble. Jim. "I'm a lazy beggar, and could go on shooting partridges, smoking cigars, and listening to your music till my moral convictions insisted upon my going down to Grantham, and screwing up the four hunters I've got standing there; but when a thing's got to be done that wants doing, why the sooner it's done the better. I'm off to Liddington just as soon as Harold has had time to get due notice of my approach."

"It's very, very good of you, and I shall never forget it—come of it what may. I

shall make no further pretence of detaining you, as I am so anxious to arrive at the truth of this matter. What excuse shall you make to Harold for this unexpected return?"

"Tell him I've come back for my favourite cigar-case," replied the Honble. Jim, laughing, "left unaccountably behind; but the moment I get him quietly to myself, I shall tell him I have come back to ask that one question."

"Will that be prudent, do you think?" asked Miss Layton.

"Yes; if your theory is true, I cannot be too direct in my queries. The blunter they are, the quicker I am likely to come at what we wish to know; but I warn you, I've slight hopes of any satisfactory result."

"Ah! but you'll do a girl's foolish mission for all that; and, bear in mind, that she's fighting for the happiness of two people she dearly loves, and whom she honestly believes to have been unjustly estranged."

"Depend upon me," replied Jim, as they re-entered the house.

However frivolous might have been the excuse upon which Jim Laceby volunteered his return to Liddington, he was little likely to meet anything but a cordial acquiescence in his proposition. He and Herrick were Luxmoore's two most intimate friends, and of the pair Harold held the Honble. in by very far the highest estimation. He, perhaps, liked Cyril Herrick, a man of about his own age, as much as he did Laceby ; but all that *savoir vivre*, that imperturbation and shrewd knowledge of his fellows which Jim possessed was exactly what quick young men like Luxmoore so reverence in their associates of ten or fifteen years' more standing ; and, most assuredly, Harold looked upon the Honble. with very great respect.

"Charmed to see you back again, Jim, all unexpected as it is," he exclaimed, as

he welcomed his guest in the hall. "I'm afraid we've rather spoilt the partridges; but there are some out-lying beats which abound in walking, whatever they may do in birds, and the cellar holds out bravely as yet."

But though Luxmoore carried off Laceby's return thus lightly, he puzzled over it not a little. That he should come back in such mysterious fashion from Laxton was food for conjecture, considering the terms he—Harold—conceived himself to be on with that family. His shooting parties were about over, and there were only two or three of his neighbours staying in the house at present—keen old sportsmen, quite content to come *en garçon* and give the birds a second or third brush over; men who spent a decorous hour in the smoking-room, and who, if they smoked, constituted one cigar as their limit. So that, at a little after eleven, Jim Laceby and his host found themselves there *tête-à-tête*.

"Good sport at Laxby, I suppose?" observed Luxmoore, throwing himself upon the sofa, as the last of his country friends made his exit; "Layton usually has plenty of birds, I believe, and his keepers understand killing them."

"Yes, we didn't do amiss, but you don't suppose, Harold, I've come back to discuss the Laxton shooting with you. Don't you think it is probable I have come upon another errand, considering the terms you have been on with that family?"

"Terms which they have thought fit to break in the most peremptory manner," replied Luxmoore sharply. "I can imagine no message you could bring me from Laxton after the way Gracie has thought proper to treat me. She went out of this house my affianced bride this time last year, vowing, in spite of her father's opposition, to hold true to me. Before the summer came I was dismissed."

The Honble. Jim raised himself from

the depths of his easy chair, screwed his glass into his eye, and contemplated the speaker with bland astonishment.

" You think she has behaved badly to you ? " he inquired ; " in fact, not to mince matters, jilted you ? "

" I don't care to talk about it," rejoined Harold. " I loved that girl with all my heart and soul, but if you mean has she broke off our engagement—Yes."

" Gad ! there's something in this idea of Annie Layton's, after all, perhaps," thought Laceby. " I'll go in for the test question at once, and see what comes of it."

" Will you answer me one question, Harold ? Did you get a note from Grace Layton, begging you to come and speak to her at Ascot ? "

" Certainly not. I didn't even know she was there. I never saw her. What can you mean ? It was scarce likely that she would write such a note to me."

" I happen to know she did," replied

Laceby. "Wait a second, and you shall know a little more. What reason did she give for breaking off her engagement? Excuse me, Harold, I know it's rather a rude question, but I have good and sufficient grounds for asking you, which I am about to explain."

"Our correspondence got all wrong. She accused me of coldness, twitted me with wanting to use a husband's authority before I had acquired a husband's powers. She got incomprehensible in her letters; they grew petulant, and full of accusations, and finally she wrote, and said that all had better be at an end between us."

"That don't sound like Gracie either," said the Honble., "and, mind, I've known her from her short-frock days."

"You're right; it don't. I'd have told any one he lied who had made such an allegation against her this time last year. Now, what have you to tell me?"

"You still love her?" asked Laceby.

"I wish I did not," returned Harold wearily; "but let me hear about the Ascot note."

"Let me think a moment," said Jim, and for a little he smoked on in silence.

"Yes," he observed meditatively at last. "I believe that is the real state of the case. I think that the correspondence between you and Gracie has been to some extent tampered with, how much so, it will be of course your business to find out. I doubt her having written such letters as you describe; her sister will not believe that you ever wrote such letters as you have done to Gracie, except under sinister influence and misconception."

"Good God! Jim, no soul ever had anything to say to my letters but myself," cried Luxmoore.

"Just so," retorted the Honble., placidly; "and of course Gracie wrote her own also. Now, mark me. I ain't clever, as I told you, with thanks to Providence,

once before. Let me sum up. First, there is no doubt that Gracie wrote you at least one rather important note that you never received. My comment on that is, that I don't believe in the Post-Office authorities making a mistake; they rarely do. Secondly, it is quite evident that two people knowing each other well, as you and Gracie do, and who have been in correspondence for some weeks, could hardly be simultaneously surprised at such a radical change in each other's letters, unless it could be afterwards accounted for."

Harold nodded.

"Now, I'll admit I'm beat as to how to account for all this, but I'm quite clear about what you ought to do. See Gracie Layton, hap what hap. Tell her you never got that note before Ascot; show her the letters you have, and ask her to explain them. If a flood of light does not break in upon you both then, well, I'll admit I have interfered to very little purpose, and

swear solemnly never to thrust my finger into a love-pie again."

"By Jove! Jim, you're right! I'll go over to Laxton to-morrow."

"Indeed, you won't. You would probably not see Gracie if you did. Remember, you have only one friend in the garrison, and that's Annie. Wonderful staunch clever girl that, true as steel! The whole family, your *fiancée* included, look upon it that you have behaved disgracefully. If this business has been all a mistake, we can't afford to make another about putting it to rights. Look here, I will write to Annie Layton to arrange a meeting with her sister the week after next."

"Absurd; as if it could not be arranged for this week," interrupted Luxmoore, earnestly.

"Well, it's doubtful; and next, remember, we're bound to be at Newmarket, to see Coriolanus win the Middle Park Plate."

"For God's sake, Jim, let me have this

cleared up as soon as possible. I've said nothing even to you, but I've been terribly cut up about the whole affair."

" Trust in me for no unnecessary delay ; but, Harold, do play this game according to my advice. An error now is fatal, and, like the proverbial looker-on, I am a better, because cooler, judge than you of what is best to be done. Now let's be off to roost. We'll win a hat-full on the Heath over Coriolanus next week, and dissipate all the clouds between you and Gracie the week after, take my word for it."

CHAPTER IX.

THE DÉBUT OF CORIOLANUS.

THE leaves come whirling down apace, there is a sharp crackle of early frost in the mornings, and the evenings draw in and become disagreeably "nippy." Shooting men are busy amongst small covers that can be shot pretty well from the outside, and the *careful* sportsman is busy picking up the outlying pheasants. Hunting men still anathematise the blindness of the fences, but they are getting to work a bit for all that, though they have, as yet, hardly settled down to their favourite pastime. Town has filled again ; the holidays are over some weeks past, and fires in full

blast at the clubs as elsewhere. A bright but keen October, and the members of the "Hædulus" are busy with speculation as to what will win the Cesarewitch and the Middle Park Plate.

"I suppose Luxmoore will show this second Eclipse of his this time, at all events?" says Berkley Holt, as he lounge with a knot of men, over sherry and bitters in the club coffee-room. "Have you heard anything about it, Dick?"

"No," replied young Layton. "He and I are not on speaking terms at present."

Nobody offered any comment on this ill-timed remark. It was well known about London that Harold's engagement with Grace Layton was at an end, and the members of the "Hædulus" had no disposition to go into particulars of the rupture with the brother of the lady.

"Of course, he may be a good colt, this Coriolanus, and I hear to-day that a lot of good money went on him at the Victoria ;

but I've no belief in a young one that never runs. Why didn't they bring him out for the Champagne, if he was any good?"

"Suppose they thought they could win that with Hypocrite," remarked Billy Rowson, a young gentleman who had already developed much astuteness about turf matters.

"Hypocrite's an arrant cur," replied Holt, "and never attempts to race when he's collared. He showed it at Ascot; showed it again most conclusively at Doncaster."

"Yes, you're right," rejoined Rowson; "but about Coriolanus, bear in mind, though we've heard of him all the year, this is the first time that the stable have ever backed him, and they have this week, both for the Middle Park and Derby, in real earnest. Plyant does Luxmoore's commissions, and he's been awfully busy the last few days."

"What do they lay now?" inquired Dick Layton.

"Well, four to one's hard to come by, and I think he bids fair to start as hot a favourite as ever went for the Blenkiron prize."

"The Felon beats him in their places for a hundred, all the same!" exclaimed Holt, boisterously.

"Done!" replied facile Dick Layton, who still held to a firm belief in the crack of Blithedown.

"You think a good deal of The Felon, Berkley," observed Rowlson, dryly. He had just got an inkling that Holt had something to say to the control of that horse—a fact which Berkley Holt was by no means anxious to publish to the world.

"He's always done what he has been asked," returned the other; "and I look upon him as good enough to give 7lb. to an animal that's never been seen in public yet, however much they may talk about him. Talking don't win races, my friend."

"No; but Darlington knows what he's

about, and I hear Coriolanus has been kept for this race. He's got no penalties, and *The Felon* carries all the extras."

"Haven't I just said so," retorted Berkley, "and expressed my convictions, to the tune of a hundred, that he can give all the weight away to Coriolanus? Now I'm off. Adieu."

Yes; there was no doubt that the crack of the Blithedown stable had been backed in genuine fashion for the great two-year-old race of the year. The fact was freely advertised in all the sporting papers, and Mr. Rowlson made no mistake when he affirmed that the commission was for the owner. Mr. Plyant, indeed, had so large an order to fulfil for Luxmoore and his friends, that he had not as yet much above half accomplished his mission, and was already greatly disgusted at the absurdly short price proffered against the colt. But Coriolanus had been noised abroad so long as a phenomenon in horse flesh, that it was

small wonder the public, when they ascertained that he really was to run—ascertaining, too, remember, with more accuracy than the shallow-pated public usually do, wont as they are, to back for the Ascot Cup that which is intended by its owner for the Alexandra Plate—should jump upon him. The outside world, at all events, on this occasion showed some method in their madness, going with the owner in their investments, instead of preceding him—a pursuit of the early worm which has been fraught with much bad language, and discomfiture upon more than one occasion.

The crowd on the classic Heath waxes thick on the eventful day of the two-year-old Derby. The race has excited great interest from its foundation, an interest by no means lessened by the discovery that it is possible to win or loose pretty nearly as much money over it as is to be accomplished over the great contest at Epsom. Given, a profusion of backers, and I should

imagine on an English race-course the necessary equivalent of layers would be rarely wanting. At all events, at Newmarket, this fitful October day, the two arrays stand in grim defiance; the fielders with their fierce war-cry of "Some of these runners I'll lay against," are answered back by—"What about Coriolanus?" The Blithedown crack, indeed, is, perhaps, as strong a favourite as ever started for the Middle Park Plate. The heavy commission sent out by the stable, conjoined with the extreme anxiety of the public to back him, have brought the son of Velocipede to two to one, and "very little of that about," as Mr. Plyant suavely informs his clients, as he reads over his book to Harold at the conclusion of his labours.

"They back The Felon a good bit, don't they?" remarked the Honble. Jim.

"Yes, Mr. Laceby," replied Plyant. "He's backed for a tidy amount of money, and by men who know what they're about;

but Caraway, I should say, is second favourite.”

“Let us go, Jim, and see him saddled,” said Luxmoore, “and give Darlington a hint as to how the market goes.”

The two accordingly left the lee of the Stand, under which they had been standing during the above conference, and strode across to the Birdcage, where Coriolanus was undergoing his toilet. The colt was surrounded by quite a circle of lookers-on, and, upon the whole, there were very few exceptions made to either his looks or condition. That he was a race-horse, and fit to run, defied all contradiction. A good deep bay, with dark points, standing about fifteen two—difficult to pick holes in. But never yet was man or horse that had not a weak place somewhere; and some good judges voted Coriolanus rather high upon the leg. Again, the colt was somewhat fractious, and lashed out wickedly while being saddled; and once more the quid-

nuncs whispered, "a queer-tempered one, depend upon it." Still, the general opinion was that Coriolanus, in appearance, was worthy of his high reputation, and that, with old Shooting Star to try with, the stable could hardly have made much mis take about him. It was said that "the Admiral" had pronounced him the best-looking colt of the year, and that Lord Portsmouth, one of the very best judges of racing stock in England, had indorsed this opinion.

A colt may be a good horse, though not a particularly good-looking one, and such was the case with The Felon, which colt was by no means so taking an animal to the eye as his handsome opponent.

"Well, Darlington, he looks like winning, and, if he's beat, it should be on his merits. They were taking six to four, I hear, about him just now. I suppose you'll have something on ; the average isn't very good."

"I'll take a hundred, sir, if you can spare

it," replied the trainer, quietly. "What else are they backing?"

"All right," rejoined Luxmoore. "The Felon, I'm told, is backed for good money, and there's a tremendous run on Caraway. He's never been out yet, you know."

"I'm afraid of nothing this time, sir, but if we are beat it will most likely be by The Felon. I can't believe he can give 7lb. to so highly tried a one as ours; but he's a rare good horse that; and Hypocrite is so uncertain a brute that we've never been able to get his length."

"You and Sam have settled how it's to be run, of course," rejoined Harold. "When I see you again, I hope we shall have scored the Middle Park."

"We shall be there, or thereabouts," replied the trainer, in his usual tranquil manner, as he turned to say a few last words to Sam Burton, preliminary to giving him a leg up.

Laceby and Luxmoore meanwhile made

their way to a roomy break, which is drawn up close to the cords a little in front of the winning-post. It is occupied by Mrs. Florenstein and her daughter; Herrick, now formally engaged to the demoiselle; and Mrs. Richeton.

" You bring us good news," observed the latter. " Is it not so ? "

" I bring you no news," rejoined Harold, " unless it be news to tell you that the black and crimson hoops are brimful of confidence and eager for the fray."

" Ah ! " cried Mrs. Florenstein, " we wanted that to strengthen our convictions, for we have cast down all our available resources upon this handsome *débutant* of yours."

" Wait till you see him canter, Mrs. Florenstein, and then you'll own he's worth gambling over."

" Not another Hypocrite," cried the lady, laughing. " It was well for you, Theodora, that you were not at Doncaster. It was

a week of wailing for us all, my dear. We dissolved into tears over the Champagne, and continued showery all the week, till Shooting Star displayed himself like a rainbow in the Cup, and shed a ray of hope over the future."

"One had no business to stand Hypocrite again after the New Stakes," observed the Honble.

"Then pray why did you do so?" inquired Mrs. Florenstein.

"I didn't," answered Laceby, laconically.

"Why, hang it, Jim!" exclaimed Luxmoore, "I always understood you backed the black and crimson at Doncaster."

"So I did, and in the Champagne too. Bound, you know; shouldn't have known peace of mind if I hadn't, and you'd won. But I really couldn't have Hypocrite again, so I backed the other. He wasn't much good, but he did beat that speedy coward."

"I'm afraid it's too true, Harold, from all I hear, and from all I saw in the New

Stakes, the chestnut's a rogue," said Mrs. Richeton, softly.

"Well, I suppose so," rejoined Luxmoore, a little bitterly. The admission that our swans have proved geese is wont to carry a flavour of hyssop along with it. "I can't be said to be lucky with my young ones; even Coriolanus may develop want of courage or stamina, good as he is at home, when put to the test."

"Oh, come, I say, Harold," rejoined the Honble., "none of that. If it's no use crying over spilt milk, it's much more unnecessary to weep before it is spilt. Of all the delusions in life, losing in anticipation is the worst."

"I quite agree with Mr. Laceby," exclaimed Theodora," and when you are beaten refuse to believe it to boot. But ah!—here they come!" and as she spoke, the field for the Middle Park Plate went leisurely down.

There was a good half-score runners,

but I shall particularise only the three or four that have to do with our story. In an equine drama there is always a considerable proportion of supernumeraries, amongst which the knights of the pencil invariably trust to discover an unknown star of magnitude. The distant roar of the ring is hushed, and the bookmakers in their flies career across from thence to the ropes, like some chariot charge of early British history, eager to scrutinise the competitors, or, it may be, lay a little more against the favourites with the inmates of the Jockey Club's stand. Ptolemy, a son of Rameses, in the well-known green and silver braid, leads the way, and it is whispered about that his popular owner considers he has a chance, and has taken several long shots about him ; he, too, like Caraway and the favourite, is among that dark division that have yet to prove their home-born reputations—school reputations that, like our own, are by no means some-

times borne out by subsequent performances. There is the man, like the horse, "good only in front," as well as he, who, like his equine type, succeeds by dogged pluck and perseverance. One or two more competitors of no particular repute come next, part of the chorus in the drama about to be played; and then Caraway canters quietly by in the all-pink and black cap. Two or three more of the supernumeraries, and Coriolanus, fretting at his bit, and showing signs of impatience, passes. The occupants of the break are loud in commendation of the favourite. Mrs. Florenstein and Mrs. Richeton are both judges of a race-horse, and wax strong in their admiration. It does occur to Theodora that it is possible this colt may show temper, but she will not allow herself to suggest such a thing. She knows that Harold and his friends have all backed Coriolanus heavily. What good is whispering a word of caution now? It is too

late ; and who would be a bird of ill-omen while the dice yet rattle in the box ? The Felon is the very last of the procession, cantering down in sober fashion, as if not particularly interested in the event ; and to those not conversant with racing, nor what he has already done, does he carry much conviction of being dangerous. Though he pulls somewhat hard, there can be no doubt about the favourite being a magnificent mover, and his admirers are thoroughly satisfied with their pet. The Felon, too, steals along in a quiet, easy fashion, which makes lookers-on deem him a much better horse than when merely walking they would have been inclined to pronounce him. Caraway does not quite please the *cognoscenti*, though they incline to the belief that Ptolemy can gallop a bit.

“ There’s nothing in it like our horse,” says Mrs. Florenstein, laughing. “ Don’t you agree with me, Theodora, and feel already a winner ? ”

The widow gave a little nod in reply; but, in good sooth, she did not feel like a winner at all. She was playing for very different stakes from the rest of the party; and, though she had of course backed Coriolanus, cared really very little whether that high-bred animal finished first or last. She went racing upon all fitting opportunities, not that she cared for the sport, but because it threw her and Harold Luxmoore together. If she had not been at Doncaster, yet had she been at Scarborough for some little time, and there Theodora began to feel sanguine that the rekindling of the old love in Harold's breast was about to be accomplished. There had been a tenderness in his adieux that she thought would speedily grow into a feeling infinitely stronger. She made no great mistake. When, sore-stricken in this fashion, the staunching and binding up of our wounds falls into the hands of an old love, anxious to resume

the former relations with us, it is odd indeed if we do not yield meekly to the assault ; but Mrs. Richeton is not blind to the fact that the tender warmth of Harold's manner at Scarborough has relapsed into the frank courtesy of an old friend at Newmarket. In Yorkshire he fluttered on that ill-defined border-land which separates friendship from love. In Cambridgeshire there could be no doubt he had receded inside friendship's boundaries. Laceby's communication would account for this. Looking upon himself as thoroughly thrown over by Grace Layton, Harold abandoned himself to the blandishments of his old love, and was once more becoming the slave of Theodora Richeton's fascinations. The widow did not deceive herself in the least. What the force working against her might be she did not know, but that something highly inimical to her aspirations had taken place she felt perfectly assured. She had not expected to attain the goal she

aimed at all at once. She must have patience—that she was prepared for. In the mean time she considered that it would be necessary to see Berkley Holt immediately upon her return to town, and learn his view of the situation, whether any communication between Harold and Grace Layton had taken place again, for Berkley had assured her, and as we know truthfully, that all was over between them.

Suddenly she is aroused from her reverie by a shout of “They’re off!” followed immediately by the cry of “No!—false start!” and, awaking once more to the interests immediately at stake, Theodora lifts her glasses and turns them up the Rowley Mile. Another minute or so, and once more comes the shout of “They’re off this time!” speedily followed by a roar from the bookmakers of “The favourite’s not in it.” On comes the cluster of flying colours, and Theodora can now distinguish that one horse is far behind the rest.

"By Jove! Harold," suddenly exclaims the Honble., "Coriolanus is clean out of it."

"He's creeping up now a bit," cried Mrs. Florenstein.

"Not much use," said Harold; "he'll never catch them again this side the winning-post."

It was evident that the black and crimson hoops were fifty or sixty yards in rear of everything, and as the ring had already proclaimed, with shouts of exultation, virtually out of the race. Caraway leads at the Bushes, but half way up the ascent The Felon creeps to the front, and in the next few strides it is evident that the pink jacket is compounding, and a tumultuous shriek rings through the air that The Felon wins; but suddenly, the green and silver braid jacket shoots to the front on the inside, and challenges The Felon, and the pair run a veritable ding-dong race home. The Felon runs honest, and flinches the hill not an iota, but the weight tells at

last, and his opponent gets his head in front in the half-dozen final strides, and, spite of the strenuous exertions of both The Felon and his jockey, maintains his advantage to the end. A few seconds, and Ptolemy is hailed winner of the Middle Park Plate by a neck, and the owner of the green and silver braid receives the congratulations of his friends.

The party in the break gaze at each other in unmixed astonishment.

"What does it all mean?" says Mrs. Florenstein. "Burton didn't seem to persevere after the Bushes."

"He was right there," said the Honble. "It was perfectly useless. He must have been left at the post."

"I'm afraid you've lost a big stake, Harold," murmured Mrs. Richeton softly, pondering, even in the crash of defeat, how this might serve her own ends.

"Yes, I've dropped a good bit over it," replied Luxmoore, meditatively. "I fancy

you're right, Jim, and that must be how it was. Coriolanus never got off. Doncaster told us Shooting Star was in form, so it is impossible we could be so much out in our calculations as the running would prove us. He had no chance to show want of stamina, or temper."

"He may have shown the latter at the post. Remember, there were three or four false starts, and it is possible Coriolanus was the offender."

"Come along, Jim, and see Darlington, and let us hear what he has to say about it."

So the twain jumped out of the break, and turned off in search of the trainer. They were not long before they found Mr. Darlington, engaged in an animated discussion on the subject of rose-growing with a floricultural friend he had picked up while watching Coriolanus led up and down by his boy. Quitting his friend, he at once walked across with his employer and

Laceby to look at the handsome failure, about whom the public no longer manifested the slightest curiosity.

"He looks all right, and hasn't turned a hair," said Harold.

"He ought not to do after a canter of that kind," replied the trainer quietly.

"How on earth do you account for his running, Darlington?"

"I don't attempt to account for it, sir. It's not my business; that horse is as well as a horse can be, and fit to run the Middle Park over again this minute. You must ask Sam Burton about his performance just now."

"And what did Sam say?"

"He appeared to have a good deal to say, but I stopped him, and told him he'd better keep his story for ~~you~~ you, that I was safe to hear plenty about it before I went to bed."

"And what did he say to that?" inquired Luxmoore.

"Went off in great dudgeon. I suppose, Mr. Luxmoore, I had better tell Sam to come up to you?"

"Yes ; let him come up to the Rutland before seven."

"Darlington means you to read the Riot Act, Harold," said the Honble. as they walked away.

CHAPTER X.

AFTER THE RACE.

THERE was much talk in the Subscription Rooms before dinner about the running for the Middle Park Plate. Of the ring, as a body, it may certainly be said that they do not know a race-horse when they see one, meaning that the bookmakers are, usually, by no means good judges of the make and shape of a two-year-old. A famous fielder, of some twenty years ago, scarcely deigned even to look at a race, and, as often as not, had his back to the course when the horses were running. No doubt there are exceptions, and it would

be easy to name half a score or more of the body whose opinion is, perhaps, equal to the most astute of breeders. Now, there was much difference of opinion concerning Coriolanus's performance; for while, on the one hand, he was pronounced a thorough impostor, yet, on the other, it was asserted that such running was not worth taking into consideration; that it was too bad to be true, etc., and could probably be accounted for. When Mr. Plyant was appealed to on the subject, he jocularly remarked that, "there was no accounting for these young swells' fancies; whether they'd got a clipper he didn't profess to know, but he felt pretty sure the stable thought they had, and, at all events, if any one liked to lay fifteen to a hundred against the colt for the Derby, he'd take it just once upon spec."

"Well, Jim," said Harold, as he and Laceby were lounging in a sitting-room at the Rutland, awaiting the advent of Sam

Burton, "this is rather a facer, coming upon the top of Doncaster."

"Yes, I suppose you had a good deal on it. I've dropped a monkey myself, but I had the prudence to keep out of the Doncaster scrape. I've been bit once by Hypocrite, and deserved it for abandoning my original convictions; but I'll never have anything to say to him again."

"Never mind Doncaster. What do you think of this?"

"Not much use thinking about it, Harold, till we hear what Burton's got to say. I suppose he didn't get off, and the question is, why didn't he? Burton's no boy, but an experienced jockey, and I think you ought to require a pretty clear explanation of his being left behind, if such, as I presume, is the account he'll render of Coriolanus's performance."

A knock at the door, and in response to Harold's "Come in," appeared the jockey, with a slightly perturbed expression on his countenance.

"Sit down, Sam," said Luxmoore. "Of course, I've sent for you to know what you've got to say about to-day's business. I suppose you're aware we've all lost considerably over the race."

"I'm afraid so, sir ; but it's money only lent. The horse is one of the best I ever rode, I'm certain, and if I'd chosen to persevere you would have been astonished, I think, to see how near I should have got. But it would have been a sin to show the colt up in that way, and at the Bushes I found catching my horses was hopeless, so I eased him, and finished with the ruck."

"Yes, that's all very well ; but you don't account for your being all behind hand. How came you a hundred yards nearly in rear of everything when we first caught sight of you ?"

"I thought Darlington had told you all that, sir. The colt was full of his games at the post ; not bad-tempered, mind, only

skittish, shaking his head, jumping round, and anxious to be off. As the flag fell, he spun clean round with me, and I should think they slipped me near a hundred yards. I had made about half my ground up at the Bushes, and the colt was so full of running, that if I'd gone on I'll be bound I'd have got within three lengths of the winner ; but what would have been the good, sir ? ”

“ None, certainly ; you were quite right to pull up when you found it was useless persevering. You think Coriolanus a good colt ? ”

“ I'm sure of it. He made up his ground in the most astonishing manner ; and I'll be bound, from the resolute way he breasted the hill, that he can stay. Of course, sir, out of it as I was, I can't speak positively, but I'm pretty certain I'd the foot of anything in the race, and if it had been a mile, instead of six furlongs, I should have seen—— ”

"That'll do, Sam. Hold your tongue about to-day's race, remember."

"Certainly; only, Mr. Luxmoore, there were plenty of people saw the start, recollect."

"Of course; but they don't know what you thought of the colt afterwards, and probably think he showed temper at the post. You need not enlighten them. Good-night."

"Good-night, gentlemen;" and so saying, Sam Burton disappeared.

"Now, Jim, what have you got to say about it?"

"Well," replied the Honble., "you know, we've not learnt a deal. That Coriolanus was a good colt we knew; that Mr. Sam Burton never got off we conjectured; that he eased his horse as he came up the ascent we saw; and that he was overhauling his horses considerably when he gave up, there could be no doubt."

"You don't, surely, think he could have

won if he had persevered, do you?" said Luxmoore.

"Not at all; but this isn't what Darlington meant."

"Darlington meant? I don't understand you."

"Darlington intended that you should let out a little, and give Sam Burton to understand that if he makes any more such serious mistakes about getting off he'll cease to ride for Blithedown."

"Confound it! I never comprehended when you said, 'Darlington expects you to read the Riot Act,' you meant that."

"You see, Harold, one can't afford big mistakes among your servants when you are racing on a big scale, and betting to match. It would be just as absurd to call for a jockey's jacket on such an occasion as it is, excuse me, to pass it over as lightly as you have done. You must give Burton to understand to-morrow that you can have no repetition of this sort of

thing. Such an accident may happen once, but if it is to occur again, you had better get some one to ride a little more conversant with the art of getting off."

"You don't suppose for one moment that we've been sold?"

"Certainly not. It would be most unjust to Burton to hold that opinion without strong evidence to such effect; but I should have told him a little sharply that I didn't expect such a *fiasco* to occur again. It may have been due to sheer bad luck, or it may have been the result of a little carelessness on his part. To run away with the idea, when the good thing doesn't come off, that there has been foul play, is childish. If you can't believe in your people, change them till you get those you can put faith in; but no man ever got on racing who hadn't confidence in those working for him. I could name three or four suspicious men on the turf who never thoroughly trusted their trainers, jockeys,

or anybody else connected with them. They never won. Sold ! No, I'll not say that; but you can't expect me to study your interests very closely when you think me always capable of sacrificing them."

" Well, Jim, I'm quite satisfied with my people, and never dreamt of their not doing their best for me till I thought you rather hinted that Burton had been wanting upon this occasion."

" Not at all. I didn't see the start, and, therefore, cannot say the mishap was to have been avoided. But one can't afford such mistakes racing, especially from jockeys of Burton's experience. You've got a right good trainer in Darlington, I'm sure."

" Ah ! but you don't like my jockey. Why ? " cried Harold. " Is there anything against him ? "

" No. I've a vague recollection of a queer story or two against him in days gone by ; but of late years his character

has been irreproachable. He's an undeniable fine horseman, and you're not likely to lose a race for lack of science."

"Still, you would get rid of him?"

"Now, for goodness' sake don't run away with that idea, Harold. I should do nothing of the kind; but I should tell him pretty broadly this had been a very expensive race for myself and friends, and that repetition of such ill fortune would make him a jockey I couldn't afford to employ. Now, come to dinner."

In a small house in the Cambridge Road, just upon the outskirts of Newmarket, were gathered together a trio of as unscrupulous gentlemen as one would meet with in a summer's day's march. Mr. Larcher we know; Messrs. Goodman and Osgrove, turf confederates, we have not as yet come across. These, with the addition of Berkley Holt, constituted the mysterious stable with such infinite *aliases* to which The Felon belonged. The trio were in

very fair spirits. Upon the whole, they had won their money, and though they had missed the great *coup* of the day, still the race had demonstrated past all doubt what an extraordinary good colt they were possessed of. They had finished their dinner, and were now discussing, with considerable animation, how to make the most of their nugget.

"It stands to reason," said Mr. Goodman, "that now's our time to sell. If we give out *The Felon* may be bought at a price, it won't be long before we've some of the swells nibbling at a colt with such a Derby chance as he's got. There's plenty of them would come down with their ten thousand if he passed a vet, and we know he can."

"Goody's right," chimed in Mr. Osgrove. "We can't make more out of the horse than that, and it saves all trouble and risk."

"I don't know," observed the attorney, with his usual chuckle. "He'll be a strong

winter favourite, and as he's not in the Two Thousand, there would be very good laying up to the Derby Day. I should think we might lay to win more than ten thousand."

"No, I don't think so," retorted Goodman. "You see, it isn't as if we were big bookmakers. We are not. People wouldn't take anything like that amount from any of us, no, nor yet from Holt. We're not strong enough to work the oracle."

"But we might put it in the hands of some one who is," remarked the attorney.

"And be ate up," exclaimed Mr. Osgrove, viciously. "That's what would happen; that's what always does happen when you take the big men into your councils. You get the shells of the oyster for your share."

"Well, there's no particular hurry to decide; we've plenty of time before us. We'll see what Holt has to say on the subject. He promised to look in to-night."

Berkley, indeed, had already turned the

subject over in his mind, but, like his confederates, had decided there was no immediate necessity for coming to a conclusion. He was troubling his head, indeed, very little as to what course of conduct with regard to The Felon might prove most beneficial to Messrs. Goodman and Osgrove, but as to what would conduce most to his, Berkley Holt's, benefit. If he could only persuade Larcher to take his view of the case, he knew that the attorney could put such pressure upon the other two that they must yield ; but as yet Berkley had not quite determined as to what it was he wanted. If Coriolanus was the good colt that report, and the betting on the Middle Park Plate, had indicated, it was quite possible he might require The Felon to do his best to beat his cousin's horse next year at Epsom. He had been too long on the turf to look upon it that Coriolanus had been seen on his merits that day ; and had already fathomed the

reason of the very despicable figure the colt had cut in the afternoon's race. Then, suddenly, it flashed across Berkley's busy brain that it was possible there had been a little piece of foul play in this transaction. Of course, being left behind is an accident that might occur to any jockey, and be utterly out of his power to prevent; still, Holt reflected that for a good horseman on a somewhat fretful colt it was an accident by no means difficult of simulation. He also recalled, as Laceby had done, that some years ago accusation of foul riding had been whispered about Sam Burton. Nothing had been proved against him, but he had been held under grave suspicion one season. True, these stories had long died away, and not a rumour had been abroad to his discredit of late; but Berkley Holt is very cynical in his estimate of human nature, and one of his maxims is, that a man who has once been bought is always to be bought again. An affair this,

thinks Berkley, to make further inquiry into—an opportunity of pulling the strings on the turf, as he euphonically expresses it, never to be lost sight of.

Berkley Holt, I'm afraid, goes far to prove the correctness of Sam Slick's old dictum, to wit, that when a gentleman does turn blackguard he is rather difficult to compete with. Meantime, Holt considers it would be worse than useless to hold conference with his confederates to-night. He did not see much use in talking over the game till he had made up his mind as to how it was to be played. When he had definitely settled what it was he wanted to do, it would be quite time enough to bring round Messrs. Osgrove and Goodman to his own way of thinking. As for Mr. Larcher, that was another affair ; it would be better, he opined, that the attorney and himself should arrange matters before laying the case before the other two partners of the firm. Accordingly, Berkley

left the rooms, and betook himself quietly to his own lodgings.

But if Newmarket had been wound up to much excitement about the Middle Park Plate ; if in London men gathered in the halls of the clubs, while the heterogeneous population, innocent of clubs, but deeply interested in horse-racing, clustered thick round the windows of the leading sporting journals, either in the Strand, or Fleet Street ; how, think you, were the pulses of Liddington beating while awaiting the result of the telegram ?

Mr. Calvert has gone down to the King's Head, for it was there that the first intelligence was to arrive. Dr. Slocombe had slipped down to Newmarket to see the race ; and it had been arranged that he should telegraph the issue to John Hamper, for the information of the whole village.

“Good day, Mr. Calvert,” cries the buxom hostess, as she catches sight of the

stud-groom. "No news for us yet, I'm sorry to say."

"No; impossible there should be, you know," returned Calvert, with studied indifference. "The race was not set till three, and it is barely half-past now. Then there are such things as breaks away, false starts, etc., that even make Newmarket time behindhand on some occasions. We cannot expect to hear for well-nigh another hour," concluded the stud-groom, with a hugely impatient glance at the clock, that bore testimony to much hope of earlier intelligence.

"Ay, I shall be main glad when the news comes," replied Nancy Hamper. "We may be ever so certain that a thing will be, but it's always satisfactory to know it is all over, I think, even when it's against us. Bad tidings come are not half so bad as bad tidings coming. Let me draw you a glass of ale?"

"No, thank you," replied Mr. Calvert,

testily. "I don't know what call you have to be speculating on bad tidings, when we're just waiting to hear that Coriolanus has won the Middle Park Plate. It's just like you women with your 'dids' and your 'didn'ts.' "

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Mr. Calvert," replied the landlady, with a slightly heightened colour. "I only said it was very satisfactory to know what one wished had come to pass. If Coriolanus *did* win I shall be very glad, like all Liddington; and if he *didn't*, very sorry."

"There it is. You have no business to speculate upon he 'didn't.' He must have won, of course. A horse of his shapes couldn't lose."

"He's a real beauty," conceded the landlady; "but we may begin to look out for the doctor's telegram now, surely."

"We ought to do, we ought to do," replied the stud-groom, with a twinkle in his eye; "but the doctor, you see, he's

Liddington to the backbone, Mrs. Hamper, and I don't say he would, but he might, you know, upon seeing a Liddington colt win, cry out to some one, 'We must have a bottle of champagne over this.' I don't say he would, but he might, you know," continued Mr. Calvert, with a chuckle.

"Nonsense," laughed Mrs. Hamper, "that's not like the doctor; but if you remember, he said we should likely see him very soon after his telegram."

"Yes; that only meant he intended leaving the Heath as soon as the Middle Park race was over. But surely this looks like the telegram."

The postal telegraph system had not got into full swing in the days of which I am writing, and the message had been brought over from a railway-station, some half-dozen miles off, by a man on horseback.

"Here you are, Mr. Calvert," replied the landlady, as she took the yellow envelope from the messenger's hand, and

turned to bid him put up his horse and get something to eat.

The stud-groom balanced the envelope for a few seconds on the tips of his fingers. He could not have felt more nervous about the result had he thousands of pounds depending upon it, than he was with only the prestige of the Liddington paddocks at issue on the event. Slowly he tears open the cover, flattens out the enclosed sheet :

“From William Slocombe, Newmarket, to John Hamper, King’s Head, Liddington.

MIDDLE PARK PLATE.

Ptolemy	...	...	...	I
The Felon	...	...	...	2
Caraway	...	...	...	3
Coriolanus nowhere.”				

Mr. Calvert’s face of blank dismay, as he perused the above, was a picture. “Not even in it,” he muttered. “What’s the use of blood or shapes after that. It’s Darlington’s fault, I’ll be bound ; he’s galloped the colt till he’s crisp as a biscuit, and nervous as an invalid. That can’t be his true form.”

"Oh, Mr. Calvert, I'm so sorry," exclaimed Nancy Hamper. "I can see it in your face, the Grange horse is beaten."

"Out of sight, ma'am, out of sight," replied the stud-groom, testily, as he threw the telegram across to her. "Tell the doctor, when he turns up, I shall be down a little before eight, to hear all about it," and so saying, Mr. Calvert jammed his hat over his eyes, and strode away.

Dr. Slocombe appeared a little after seven, and at once proclaimed his hunger and necessities, but Nancy Hamper was equal to the occasion. Seating the doctor down to some mighty ribs of beef, she informed him there would be a bird ready by the time he had disposed of the cold meat and pickles.

"Excellent, Nancy, nothing could be better. I suppose you've seen Calvert since my telegram came."

"Certainly; it was he opened it here. He's badly disappointed, doctor, about

Coriolanus, and said he'd look in about this time to hear what you had to say about it. I hope you've comfort of some kind for him."

"Very little, further than I still don't think it can be right."

As Mrs. Hamper bustled off to see after the bird, Calvert returned.

"Well, doctor," he exclaimed, "you've told us we're badly beat by telegram, and I've just dropped in to hear the details of the disaster. Can't he really stay? or was it a case of want of condition?"

"Certainly not the latter," replied the doctor, as he plunged his fork into the plump partridge Nancy Hamper placed before him. "No colt could have come to the post in more perfect condition; while as to the former he was never tried. How it happened I can't tell you, but Coriolanus must have got off a long way behind all the rest. He made up an immense deal of ground, too, one saw, and equally could

one see that when he came to rise the ascent Burton eased him."

"What! It was no use going on, I suppose; he was so far behind still?"

"Just so. Burton was quite right there; it was no use pushing the colt to do the impossible. How far Sam Burton was right about the commencement I don't know. I should think the squire would want a little explanation about that. The colt was backed for heaps of money, and started a tremendous hot favourite. I'm afraid the squire and his friends must have lost a lot over it."

"Ah ~~well~~, it's a comfort to find it's not so bad as I feared; this goes for nothing, eh?"

"Just so," replied the doctor. "I, for one, think quite as well of Coriolanus as ever, and, though I lost a little over him to-day, shall stand him again next time he runs."

"And you didn't see the start?"

"No."

"Well, you've finished your supper, let's draw round to the fire, and have a real good talk over the day's doings. I want to know what you think of the winner, and The Felon, etc."

The two old friends pulled their chairs round and discussed racing and race-horses generally, till Nancy Hamper intimated she was about to lock up and go to bed.



CHAPTER XI.

RECONCILIATION.

LACEBY has accompanied Harold Luxmoore back to Liddington as had been agreed upon before the Newmarket meeting. Both men have this interview that is to come with Grace Layton very much at heart. The Honble. has gradually worked round to Annie Layton's way of thinking, and, like indolent men of his class, is tremendously in earnest now he is once roused. We call such men idlers, because they have no profession, but it is a great mistake. Look how strenuously they toil after grouse, deer, or partridge ; how unflinchingly they face a wet day and a cold scent, sticking to the hounds con-

siderably longer than the hounds can stick to their fox. Energetic men these in reality, had they but been cast in the groove that suited them ; but some have never been 'prenticed at all, and of others relatives have tried to make priests of those who should have been soldiers, sailors of those who should have been lawyers ; and so such misapplied muscle and mind, having moderate competence wherewith to sustain itself, takes up field sports as a profession.

It is the evening of their arrival from Newmarket, and the twain sit round the fire sipping their after-dinner claret in somewhat sombre fashion. Indeed, the past week is not good to look back upon, both men having lost heavily on the meeting, though Luxmoore was by far the severer stricken of the two. Jim Laceby is a bold but not reckless punter ; he will plunge when it seems to him right and reasonable to do so, but the Honble.

never loses his head, and when the *coup* comes off the wrong way, does not seek to restore his fortunes by wildly betting on events beyond his comprehension. Still, Laceby has had a bad time of it this week; he lost a heavy stake over the Middle Park Plate, and did not succeed in mending matters by further speculation. Harold, on the other hand, was just the man to break the bank at Homburg ; but, *au contraire*, he was equally the man for the bank to break. One who it was scarce likely could last long upon the turf, being of the impetuous temperament, so dear to bookmakers, that must recover its losses there and then. Backing your bad luck is not held sound philosophy at the tables where you are supposed to know the chances ; but what is that to going double or quits on the next race, concerning the chances of which you know absolutely nothing ?

"Well, Jim," said Luxmoore, "Coriolanus

has been the worst thing in gold mines I've come across yet. Money lent, as Mr. Burton thinks fit to call it; at an expensive interest too."

"Got to borrow for settling-day?" asked Laceby, quietly.

"Yes; not very heavily, but I must raise some. I never had a worse week; however, thank God, it's over for the year. I shall not go to the Houghton, and Lacedemonian may win or break down in the Criterion, as the Fates decree. Darlington tells me it's just that—he'll win if his hocks stand."

"They've been shaky all along," observed the Honble. drily.

"D—n the racing! Let's bother no more about it at present. I want to talk about how I'm to see Gracie. What do you propose?"

"I've nothing to propose. I've done, as you know, all that I consider requisite. I wrote to Miss Layton to tell her that

you never had received that note of Gracie's concerning Ascot, and if she could compass a meeting between the two of you next week, and allow you to personally explain to Gracie, I thought much misconception would be removed."

"But we hear nothing from her in reply," interrupted Luxmoore, impatiently.

"Excuse me, my dear Harold," returned Jim Laceby, "Being muchly in love, I know, deadens the sense of justice, but do, please, bear in mind facts. Annie wrote back to say that she would do her best, and that we were to await a note from her. It is not likely that we shall get anything but brief notice. Your seeing Gracie, except alone, is, of course, useless; and to make sure of that, in an afternoon visit, is not quite so easy of attainment. She has to calculate your opportunity, remember."

Harold stared into the fire in silence for some minutes. Suddenly he exclaimed, "Look here, Jim, I've an idea. I'll write

to Gracie myself, and request an interview. If she does not get it there is conclusive proof of the treachery that has been somehow exercised ; if she does, the thing is settled at once."

"Quite so," replied the Honble. placidly ; "settled, I should imagine, most particularly."

"What the deuce do you mean ?"

"Let us take the conclusive part first. Grace Layton doesn't get your note ; information to the interceptor of the correspondence, whoever he may be, of your intended meeting with her—probable conclusion, the frustration of that intent."

"I never thought of that," muttered Luxmoore.

"Secondly, we will suppose Grace does get your note. I'm sorry to wound your vanity, Harold ; but, after the way in which she conceives herself to have been treated, I think it quite possible she will not answer it ; most probably she will refuse you an interview."

"But I shall explain all that," cried Harold.

"You can't: remember, what Annie has done so far has been without her sister's knowledge. We are both bound in honour to respect her secret."

"True, true; you're right all round, Jim, and there's nothing for it but to wait; but it'll be a weary two or three days, all the same."

The Honble. Jim could never be got to talk much about that Sunday afterwards (they had returned from Newmarket on the Saturday); when he did, it was with a shrugging of the shoulders, and an elevation of the eyebrows that Laceby seldom indulged in, and from which those who knew him best augured his sufferings must have been great. He was heard to contend that there are occasions upon which shooting upon Sunday should be looked upon as a fair and lawful way of taking exercise; that there were occasions when

public opinion might be conceded to, and outlying beats shot at the same time. At all events, there were circumstances under which a guest might demand to be sent out shooting, albeit there was nothing to shoot, and so pass a comparatively happy day.

The Honble. concluded this, one of the longest exordiums he was ever known to utter, by humming softly—he was given to snatches of melody—

“ Oh, Lord, it is the greatest bore,
Of all the bores I know,
To have a friend who’s lost his heart,
A short time ago ;
To have a friend who’s lost his heart,
A short time ago.”

Monday morning comes, and brings no missive from Laxton. As for the Honble., he mendaciously pleads letters to write immediately after breakfast, and escaping through the garden down to the paddocks, the morning proving wet, passes it in

smoking cigars and discussing turf lore with Calvert. It clears after luncheon, and then the Honble. is most emphatic about a turn at the birds round home; deaf to all representation of wildness on the part of the quarry, or scarcity of cover, resolute only on one point, to avoid all further discussion with Harold about his love affair, till this missive shall arrive from Laxton. Difficult, very, to fence off this, both after dinner and in the smoking-room, and only at last to be got rid of by determined refusal on Laceby's part to hear another word on the matter.

When Jim comes down to breakfast on Tuesday morning, he finds a note lying by his plate, and his host standing with his back to the fire in unmistakable impatience.

" You're awful late down, Jim," exclaimed Luxmoore, " and there's news from Laxton at last."

" Not later than usual," rejoined the

Honble. as he broke open his letter, and proceeded to read it.

Scarce had he turned the last page when an impetuous, "What does she say?" broke from Harold's lips.

"Simply this: that Dick is in town, and that her father and a friend or two, now staying in the house, will be out shooting some small covers to-morrow. You are to call at half-past twelve, and she will contrive you shall see Gracie alone for a good half-hour. Clear and simple your course, now, Harold; only, remember to take, at all events, that letter of Gracie's with you, in which she contends, your mutual engagement had best be deemed finished; that is, if you still have that letter."

"I have all her letters," replied Harold, shortly.

"No doubt," thought Jim.

It is amazing how often we cling to such proofs of our discomfiture, and read and re-read these epistles with a view to put-

ting a different construction on them. Ah ! these love words, don't we carry them over the world with us ; beginning with that first note which explained that "Mamma would be delighted to see us at dinner, etc.," down to that later and more passionate correspondence, which would read so absurdly in a breach of promise case ! To write a fine love-letter a man should be passionately in love, and under sentence of death for a cause in which he glories. A clever man would pen a prose poem on such an occasion !

That day was difficult to get through ; but the Honble. insisted on working an outlying beat with a closeness and perseverance past all commendation. They slew little, but Jim had his reward ; he walked his host weary, not only as regarded his legs, but also his tongue.

Harold was away betimes next morning, and, after close upon two hours' rail, found himself duly deposited at the Laxton Sta-

tion. It so happened that he had never visited that side of the country, consequently his face was quite unknown. He sauntered slowly through the village, and then wended his way leisurely to the hall, distant, as he was aware, about two miles. He had an hour and a half to get through, and Laceby had strongly impressed upon him the necessity of being neither in advance nor behindhand of his appointment. He loitered along the road, lounging upon stiles, till the approach of a shooting party made him think such exposure injudicious. He was right; that shooting party comprised Mr. Layton and his friends. At last it wants but ten minutes of the hour. He passes boldly through the lodge gates, and walks at a steady pace up to the house. Before he has compassed half the distance two pairs of eyes are attentively watching his approach; the one from keen interest in his coming, the other from sheer idle curiosity. Miss Layton, seated at the

window of her own room, has been watching for Harold's appearance for the last twenty minutes. Sarah Hemmings, ladies'-maid to the sisters, and inhabiting the room overhead, had been gazing idly out of the casement, when her eye was caught by the figure of a man making his way up the park. She kept her eyes upon him, because, just then, she had nothing else to exercise those brilliant organs upon ; but two seconds after her mistress, in the lower chamber, had murmured, "It is Harold," Miss Hemmings exclaimed, turning pale as death, and putting her hand mechanically to her side, "Good Heavens ! Mr. Luxmoore."

For a few seconds the girl shook all over ; then she dashed her face into some cold water, swallowed about half a tumbler, and looked at herself in the glass. She was still very pale, and, muttering to herself, "This won't do," Sarah Hemmings

and if they had never experienced his bounty at Laxton, many of them had in London. Besides, servants in these days are essentially democratic, and in opposition to the constituted authorities. Mr. Stimson, indeed, had stigmatised his master at a meeting of the upper lower house, as a regular Brutus, which was classical, and suited to his auditory, who deemed it "fashionable" for a regular brute. There is much, mind, in keeping on a level with your audience, and to warble *non per essem felicie* to those accustomed to a music-hall diet is a waste of power that giveth not satisfaction.

Harold's eyes wander mechanically round the room—a right comfortable apartment, with plenty of lounging chairs, some book-cases, an enclosed gun-rack with glass doors, a cabinet of similar construction for fishing tackle, etc. A very snug gentleman's sanctum indeed, but with nothing remarkable about it further than its ex-

treme air of comfort, and an evident determination to exclude draughts. Not only was there the screen aforesaid across the door, but a heavy curtain, now drawn on one side, and draped in voluminous folds, ran upon a brass rod that crossed the lintel.

The faint sound of the opening door, a slight rustle of dresses, Gracie Layton turns the corner of the screen, and exclaims, "Harold!—Mr. Luxmoore, what does this mean?"

Harold hears the faint click again of the closing door, and knows that the half-hour he has dreamt of for the last fortnight or so is now vouchsafed him. He is too much in earnest to hesitate.

"It means, Grace, that I am here to justify myself in your eyes, to some extent at all events. I have been told that you wrote desiring me to come and speak to you at Ascot. As there is a God in heaven, I never received that note. If I

had, can you imagine I should not have done your bidding ? ”

“ I am glad to think you never got that note,” she said, hesitatingly.

“ Are you glad to think that I did get that ? ” said Luxmoore, as he placed in her hands her own letter of dismissal. “ Read it, please, before you reply.”

The girl threw her eye rapidly over it, and as she did so her brows contracted, and an angry flash lit up her cheek. “ Harold,” she said, proudly, “ I never wrote that letter.”

“ Nor that ? ” he asked, handing her another.

She glanced at it for a minute or two, and then replied, “ Certainly not. Some of the sentences are mine ; some are not ; some are garbled. The handwriting is very like mine, but it was never penned by me.”

“ Gracie, dearest,” rejoined Harold, “ it is clear that our correspondence has been

more or less tampered with ; that could have been but with the one object—of separating us from each other. It has been terribly near, but tell me that it has failed."

" There are your letters, Harold ; but perhaps they are no more your letters than those two were mine."

" Let me see them if you still have them."

" If I still have them !" she exclaimed, with a bright smile ; " excuse me for a minute while I see," and Gracie sped to her room with a foot light as her heart. Harold still loved her, that was clear; there could be nothing of any great importance to learn after that.

She crossed the hall with such rapidity that she failed to notice Sarah Hemmings, who was loitering about the door leading to the servants' offices. To do the fair Hemmings justice she seemed by no means covetous of attracting attention, but that

she was fluttered considerably there could be no doubt. She looked after her mistress for a moment, and then glanced round the hall. Not a soul there but herself. "Gone for his letters, not a doubt of it; it's all over." Then Miss Hemmings glanced at the door which Gracie had left half open in her haste. "It's now or never," she muttered; "she'll be down in another minute or so. These letters won't take long to find, oh dear no. We know where they are pretty well. I must know what comes of it all, and to do that I must risk something," and, so saying, Miss Hemmings glided quietly through the half-open door, and slipped behind the heavy folds of the curtain.

Two or three minutes more and Gracie Layton re-enters the room, closes the door behind her, and coming up to Luxmoore, places a small packet of letters in his hands. "Tell me you never wrote those, and it shall be as you will."

As he finished the first he tossed it contemptuously into the fire. "I never wrote that, Gracie, nor is that my handwriting; but, as you said of yours, it contains a portion of what I did write. Whoever composed that had the letter I really did write open on the table before him." He read a second, and was about to toss this also into the fire, when he suddenly checked himself. "Stop, we must keep these, Gracie. I'm not quite Christian enough to forgive whoever it may be that has occasioned me all the misery of the last five or six months." He glanced through two or three more, and then said, "There is not time to go through them all, but I have seen quite enough to know that I'm justified in saying that these letters are not of my writing. Forgeries all, even as yours to me have been. My hand has been very cleverly imitated, and I am not surprised at your being deceived, but for one thing."

"What is that, Harold?"

"You ought to have known I never could have written you such letters."

"But you so avoided me all the season. I never got but the most distant bow from you."

"I was following the dictates of your own letters, child. There, read them;" and he threw a small packet on the table.

"But, Harold, don't you think that you also should have held me incapable of writing such letters to you?"

"Too true," he replied, laughing. "We have both been the dupes of a miserable trickster; but I am forgiven, is it not so?"

"Yes," she whispered softly, as he drew her to him.

"We have both been weak and credulous, Gracie, to be so easily imposed upon, and I have been the weakest of the two. You showed more faith than myself, for you did seek to have my falsehood confirmed by my own lips, at any rate; whilst I——"

"Hush, Harold," exclaimed the girl, as she placed her small hand on his lips. "Let us talk no more of the past. You're mine own again, now."

"Yes, and the happiest fellow in England."

"And you are to win the Derby next year, Harold, so Dick tells me."

Luxmoore's face fell. "I don't know," he replied, slowly, after a short pause. "I did think I had some wonderful good young ones, but they have disappointed me cruelly. The best of the bunch, the one I showed you last year at Liddington, did nothing last week, though I fully expected him to win the big two-year-old race of the year.

"And I'm afraid you must have lost a deal of money? Harold, I am very sorry."

"Do you know that if you remain true to me it may be your lot to drag by year after year, associated with myself in pursuit

of the fatal prize my infatuated uncle has willed I should strive for?"

"I know," she said gently.

"And that you may waste your youth and your brightness waiting for a lover who may never have the right to claim you?"

Again she bowed her head in meek assent.

"Or, if he does, may claim you when an embittered old man, whom long struggles with fortune have made sour and suspicious."

"So I may see him and write to him, I'll not complain. That he could ever be what he has just pictured himself I'll not believe. Harold, I love you, and am yours when you come to take me, years though it may be."

"My darling!" replied Luxmoore, "and do you think I could be such a selfish brute as to assent to your wearing your life out in that fashion. No, Gracie, nor yet ruin my own. Listen."

His request was complied with in a manner he little dreamt of. Miss Hemmings' neck had been for some time stretched to its possible extent from behind her curtain, but now, carried away by the interest of the situation, she glided from its protecting folds to the back of the screen.

"Gracie," continued Luxmoore, in deep resolute tones, "the last few months have shown me myself thoroughly. With your love I am strong, and may do some good in this world. Without it I am nothing, a mere straw upon the stream, drifting ever, and usually more or less, into stormy waters. My own, if you can afford to wait, I cannot. It is possible to buy Liddington too dear. A life's happiness is more than the old Grange is worth. We will await one more cast of the dice; see, though I am not sanguine, what comes of this next Derby. If I fail, as is most probable, then, Gracie, you must make up

of the fatal prize my infatuated uncle has willed I should strive for ? ”

“ I know,” she said gently.

“ And that you may waste your youth and your brightness waiting for a lover who may never have the right to claim you ? ”

Again she bowed her head in meek assent.

“ Or, if he does, may claim you when an embittered old man, whom long struggles with fortune have made sour and suspicious.”

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your mind to be a poor man's wife. We will hand over Liddington and the race-horses to Berkley Holt, and settle down on the thousand a year that will remain to me."

"Give up Liddington? No, Harold, you couldn't do that."

"I can, and shall, I swear, if I don't win the Derby next May," retorted Luxmoore, emphatically.

"And you will be giving it up for my sake. No, I cannot allow that," interposed Gracie.

"No," he answered, with a sad smile, "I won't play the hypocrite. I shall be giving it up quite as much for my own. I have had a taste of this turf gambling, and it is like the apples of the Dead Sea. Race without gambling I couldn't, and gambling high, mind. Take that zest from it, and the thing would simply bore me."

"Ah," replied the girl, "you are very good. You say all this to spare me; to

forbid my thinking you are making any sacrifice on my account."

"I have spoken the truth, child," returned Luxmoore, solemnly, as he took her face between his hands. "To marry you will be my making. To take racing for my bride instead will be my breaking. I vow to God, win the Derby or not, to marry you next year. Is it a bargain?"

"Yes, Harold, if you will."

He pressed his lips to hers, and then exclaimed, "Time I fled, Gracie, I suppose, but, no matter, all is clear between us now. As for those letters, Heaven help the writer if I ever make him out. Meanwhile, sweet, it is your own lips must pronounce my banishment henceforth. No writing, be it ever so like your own, will suffice."

"God bless you, Harold! I, too, will not doubt your hand till your own mouth confirms it henceforth. Once more, my own, good-bye."

A warm embrace, and the lovers left the room, while Miss Hemmings, emerging from her concealment, positively shook all over with excitement concerning the information she had acquired.

CHAPTER XII.

A LEAP YEAR PRIVILEGE.

MR. HOLT, upon the whole, is tolerably well satisfied with the Second October Meeting. It was not that he had won much money, but he saw his way into "a potentiality of riches" from what had taken place there. He had easily persuaded his partners that mid-winter would be quite time enough to settle upon what their course of action should be with regard to The Felon. Things had prospered wonderfully with Berkley Holt ever since Mrs. Richeton's three hundred pounds had given him his *point d'appui*, and he now not only showed again within the precincts

of Tattersall's, but literally had a fair balance at his banker's. But Berkley was wise in his generation, and affected to be no better off than heretofore, being perfectly aware that he possessed a numerous body of creditors, who only refrained from squeezing "poor Berkley" to the uttermost, from their well-founded opinion that he was a sponge not worth wringing out.

One of the earliest things requiring his attention seems to be a letter from Mrs. Richeton, in which that lady desires, in most diplomatic language, to know whether he is quite certain that the engagement between Harold and Grace Layton is utterly at an end, and whether it is true that they never meet now.

"By Jove! she is clever," muttered Berkley. "All the world might read this note, and there is nothing but curiosity on her part to be made out of it." However, it had to be answered, so Berkley made reply that he felt quite sure that the break

between Harold and Grace was final, and that they had never even seen each other of late. He added, further, that Mrs. Richeton might thoroughly depend upon what he said, as he was kept accurately informed of everything that took place at Laxton.

Miss Hemmings, after her escape from the Squire's room, rushed off to think over her surreptitiously-acquired information. She was simply amazed at her own knowledge, but, like most people who have once been corrupted in this wise, her predominant idea was to make the most she could of what she had so unexpectedly discovered. Sarah Hemmings was a shrewd, vain, but, withal, somewhat ambitious young person. When Berkley Holt had, in the first instance, by dint of flattery and bribery, cajoled her into intercepting the lovers' correspondence, she had deemed that she was merely helping a rejected one against a successful one, and that a

most confidential post would be hers when Mr. and Mrs. Holt should start their own establishment. But she was far too shrewd not speedily to discover that this was not the case, and had puzzled often since over what object Holt could have in meddling with this correspondence. Nothing could be easier for Miss Hemmings than the impounding of all these letters. Both at Laxton and in London she was accustomed to bring their letters up to her young ladies' rooms ; nothing more simple than to put all letters in Harold Luxmoore's handwriting into her pocket. Again, at Laxton, letters for the post were habitually deposited in a quaintly-worked box in the hall ; not a post-box at all, but a bit of *bric-à-brac*, the lid of which was liftable by all comers. Nothing simpler than to watch her opportunity, run over the letters, and possess herself of anything addressed to the Master of Liddington. As often as not, the young ladies left their letters in

their rooms for her to post. Her task at Laxton was ludicrously easy. In London it had been more difficult to intercept letters to Harold Luxmoore ; but, remember, the mischief had been pretty well accomplished before the Laytons had got back to Grosvenor Gardens, while Gracie's note about Ascot had been frankly confided to the hands of the traitress. All these intercepted letters had been enclosed to Berkley Holt.

Mr. Larcher was a great man. So was Dr. Dodd, who perished from his reverent belief in the Bard of Avon.

“Though Shakespeare asks us ‘what’s in a name,’
As if cognomens were much the same,
There’s really a very great scope in it.
For instance, wasn’t there Doctor Dodd,
Who found four thousand pounds and odd,
A prison, a cart, and a rope in it ? ”

Mr. Larcher knew better. He knew there was a great deal in a name, particularly when you took to using those of

other people, more especially upon paper. But Mr. Larcher held that as long as such use was in no wise connected with pecuniary matters, it materially diminished the risk of so doing. Mr. Larcher, among his other genial accomplishments, had a marvellous turn for the imitation of handwriting. It was he who had proposed to shiver the engagement of the lovers by taking the correspondence into his own hands. The original letters were handed over to him, and he replaced them by forgeries of his own composition, always keeping some of the original to give a *vraisemblance* to the whole. That he was not a very successful composer of love-letters we may deduce from Miss Layton's scepticism concerning his work, albeit the handwriting had thoroughly deceived her. Mr. Larcher had originally intended that Berkley Holt should have been his tool, and, but for the bank that the latter had so unexpectedly discovered in Mrs. Richeton,

that would assuredly have been the end of their connection. But once pecuniarily beyond the attorney's control, Holt's bolder nature asserted itself; moreover, for fertility of resource, quickness of observation, and cool calculation of chances, Berkley was more than Mr. Larcher's equal on the turf. Holt's audacity, assisted by the luck that had so far followed his counsels, had made him quite captain of that mysterious racing firm with which he was connected.

But we must once more revert to Sarah Hemmings brooding over her newly-acquired information. She did not understand the whole thing very well, but as far as she could make it out, it was clear that if Harold failed to win next year's Derby, and married Gracie, then that a large property would fall to Berkley Holt. The fair Hemmings had seen a good bit more of Holt than might be supposed. She had had more than one interview with him when the family were in town by a good

deal. She was a vain, good-looking girl, and as far as it was in her nature to fall in love with anything but her own self, she had fallen in love with Holt. Berkley was quite aware of this preference, and in his own interests paid considerable devotion to Miss Hemmings when they met. Still, the ladies'-maid combined business with her passion, and showed a greed for gold in requitement of her services, with which Berkley often twitted her. Holt, indeed, had thought more than once of late he had made rather a mistake in affecting a passion for her. It would have been safer to trust altogether to her rapacity, as this love of hers might prove inconvenient ; and any slight to what she deemed her love, but which was in reality her vanity, might result in Heaven knows what exposure—no calculation possible on that point.

Sarah Hemmings, in her relations with Holt, had already shown herself a clever and arbitrary woman, with a very tolerable

appreciation of the art of *chantage*. She had more than once insisted on his escorting her to some place of amusement, and Berkley, albeit with no very good grace, had felt constrained to obey. He was afraid to imperil his hold upon that correspondence, and the girl was perfectly aware of it. If she had not been more *exgeante*, it had been simply that Miss Hemmings' evenings abroad had been naturally somewhat restricted from her employment. It is difficult to say what the ladies'-maid contemplated by her flirtation with Berkley in the first instance. At all events, she was well paid for her clever surveillance of that correspondence, and, it may be, pursued the flirtation as a mere distraction and sop to her vanity; but certain it is now, that as Sarah Hemmings muses over her knowledge, she suddenly conceives the idea that marriage shall be the price she will put upon it. She was a shrewd girl, this, in her way, and her inclination for

Berkley Holt blinded her not one whit as to his real character; but then she fell into the ordinary trap-fall of a vain woman, that her charms and cleverness would enable her to manage this man quite easily. It is so at times; and how many women have awoke to find they have made a great mistake! A stupid man, especially, is peculiarly difficult of management; and one shudders to think what heavy work it must be!

Miss Hemmings, after much reflection, resolves that she must go to town and see Berkley Holt. Not difficult, of course, to get three days' leave of absence to see her relations, or some similar excuse. Considerably astonished, and somewhat disconcerted is Mr. Holt, when a note from the ladies'-maid informs him that she is in town, and will call upon him on business of very great importance. "The girl's becoming a nuisance," he muttered; "because I paid her a few compliments, and

took her to a theatre or two, she's fool enough to believe I really care about her. No; it is getting time to disabuse her mind of that idea. She's served my turn right well, and cannot but admit that she has been liberally paid for what she has done." Opening a drawer of the writing-table, he drew forth a memorandum-book, and proceeded to run over the pages. "Yes," he muttered, at length, "my esteemed and dearly beloved Sarah, you have had just one hundred and thirteen pounds since I went down to Laxton the end of February last, and I think that is sufficient recompense for your services. Of course, I don't wish to quarrel; but, practically, I have no further need of you, it strikes me. Useful, of course, to have so clever a confederate behind the scenes at Laxton; but that little affair is, I think, thoroughly disposed of. What can she want to see me about? Her business of great importance, I take it, will resolve itself into a

cock-and-bull story, with a request for ten pounds or so as a corollary. Well, she can have that, with a clear understanding that it's the last."

Berkley received Miss Hemmings in his usual off-hand fashion; but became aware at once that there was something more in her visit than he had supposed by the stateliness of her demeanour. Miss Hemmings, full of this new idea of hers, had clothed herself from top to toe in dignity. She felt that the marriage contract was not to be entered into lightly, and that especially did it behove her to show Mr. Holt, upon this occasion, what a thorough lady she really was. When her class try to demonstrate that to us, we know what comes of it—a travestie of their mistress's manners; or, probably, of the most rudely offensive lady with whom their mistress is on visiting terms.

"Charmed to see you, Sarah," said Berkley, after he had duly conducted the

fair Hemmings to an arm-chair by the fire.

"Ah! Mr. Holt, that's what you all say, and when a poor girl is fool enough to believe you, why, you laugh at her."

"But, you know, I am always delighted to have a chat with you," retorted Berkley.

"I'm not going quite to deny that. We've spent one or two pleasant evenings together, have we not? but I've come straight up from Bloomshire this time on purpose to serve you. If you are not glad to see me, Mr. Holt, you should be."

"I've told you I am," rejoined Berkley, thinking, meanwhile, what a dreary time he was like to have of it for the next hour or so.

"I have got something of importance to tell you—something of more consequence to you by a good deal than any news I ever gave you yet."

"Luxmoore's taken to writing again, I suppose?" returned Berkley, coolly. "Let's

see what he says," and he extended his hand for the letter.

"No," retorted Miss Hemmings viciously; "he seems to have opened his eyes at last, and come to the conclusion that there was something amiss with his correspondence."

"What the deuce do you mean?" inquired Berkley.

"Mean, that he has done what a sensible man would have done some time back—seen Miss Gracie, and asked her to explain her own letters. I'm not quite a fool, Mr. Holt, and don't suppose you wanted those letters merely to read."

"Why, what else do you suppose I could have wanted them for? They were always returned to you to hand over to your mistress."

"Just so; still I don't believe but what there had been additions and alterations of some sort made to them. However, it's all over now, and they have come to an understanding again."

"No! you don't mean that! How did it come about?"

"That I can't say," replied Miss Hemmings, "but Mr. Luxmoore has been over to Laxton, and they have gone over their correspondence together. Not that that can matter, you know."

Berkley Holt turned the thing rapidly over in his mind. No! he didn't, on the whole, think that this involved consequences to himself. The girl was not likely to confess that she had tampered with this correspondence. "Just the sort of petty treachery," argued Berkley, "that a woman would deny long after she was irrefragably proved guilty. Then, as Larcher had always said, it was hopeless to contest Harold's marrying. If he succeeded in breaking it off once, it was not likely he would be able to prevent it upon the next occasion; and, as Mr. Larcher had pointed out, the owner of Liddington, was not likely to want opportunities in this respect.

"How do you know all this?" he asked, at length.

"I saw Mr. Luxmoore arrive at Laxton, and I felt certain what he had come for. I saw my young lady rush upstairs for her letters, and then, for my own sake, I determined to know all."

"And how did you manage that?" asked Holt.

"As a woman usually acquires such knowledge—I listened."

"Do you mean that you were present at the interview between Luxmoore and Miss Gracie?"

"Just so," replied Miss Hemmings, nodding. "Not to them, of course; but I was in the room, and heard every word."

"Ah; and I suppose they've settled to marry, whether old Layton likes it or not?"

"What they have settled, Mr. Holt, concerns nobody in this world so much as

yourself. What took place between them is known only to me."

"Extra information of this kind, Sarah, obtained doubtless by singular daring and adroitness, of which, my dear girl, you have already given many proofs, deserves, of course, extra remuneration. Tell me your story, and there's twenty pounds to buy you a dress for Christmas."

"First, Mr. Holt, let me ask you two or three questions."

Berkley stared in mute amazement at the speaker.

"Liddington is a very fine property, is it not?"

"Yes."

"And it is possible for you to become its possessor under certain circumstances, I have heard."

"Quite so; devilish unlikely circumstances to happen, all the same."

That Miss Hemmings should be conversant with the story of Oliver Luxmoore's

will was little to be wondered at. The story was pretty generally known, and likely to be more canvassed in the servants' hall at Laxton than most places.

"What would you give to any one who showed you clearly that you could become owner of Liddington next year if you took a little trouble ? "

"Hum ! Hard to estimate. I should want, in the first instance, to know what they called a little trouble."

"Berkley, I mean Mr. Holt, if I show you how to win Liddington Grange next year, will you grant me what I ask ? "

"Depends upon how much it is," replied Holt calmly. "I am a liberal paymaster when information is really worth having."

"Would you give ten thousand pounds ? " said the girl, biting her lips, as the blood rushed into her face, for she was not blind to the way her little bit of tenderness had been ignored.

"Yes. If any information you can give me puts me in possession of Liddington you shall have ten thousand pounds."

"Not enough; will you give twenty?"

"Well, upon my soul!" exclaimed Berkley, "you seem to have a very tidy idea of disposing of first-class information. You are asking too big a slice of the cake, *ma chere*. I don't think I can afford to deal at that price quite."

"Stop a moment, I will put it in another shape. Will you make the woman your wife who shall bring you Liddington for a dowry?" and, as she spoke, Sarah Hemmings started to her feet, and, with eager eyes and flushed cheeks, stood confronting her host.

Up to this moment Berkley had placed little faith in the girl's information. That she had discovered something that might be of some use to him he had little doubt, but that her discovery was likely to make

him master of Liddington he looked upon as a wild exaggeration of her own. But that she was in possession of valuable information now he made no doubt. With a shrewd man like Holt, that last proposal carried weight. Much faith in his future must the woman have who preferred sharing his fortunes to ten thousand pounds.

"Sit down, Sarah," he said, as he rose, and handed his visitor once more to her seat. "This, remember, is rather a sudden proposition, and you must give me a few minutes before I answer you. I'm quite willing to admit you are a very pretty girl, but, remember, I never quite thought of you as a wife as yet. Let me think it over for a little."

Berkley Holt had not the slightest intention of thinking of the fair Sarah in the light she wished ; but Berkley wanted time to reflect on things, and knew that the

simplest way to silence Miss Hemmings was to appear to entertain her extraordinary proposition.

"She thinks I'm in her hands," mused Holt. "A great mistake on her part. To attack me she must first confess her own treachery, and it would be easy for me to deny all knowledge of that, and to appeal to public opinion as to the very far interest I could possibly have in such a business, as proof of my innocence. Harold and Grace have come together again. Hum ! Not much in that. What can be this vital intelligence ? Ha ! I have it. No ; impossible. He could never be such a fool. Still, that's what she's driving at ; that's the impression she's got. At all events I'll play my hand as if it was so."

"No," he said at length, "I cannot quite afford to pay that price for your information, Sarah. I acknowledge your claims freely, but, at the same time, my dear, your

previous history would be rather too well known for me to make you mistress of Liddington."

The girl rose as she replied, bitterly, "You have affected to love me, Mr. Holt, although I'll own to having put but moderate faith in such protestations. It would have been worth your while to have taken me for your wife, with the secret I should have brought as my dower; you think otherwise. I love you, and would have gone through more dirt than I have yet to make you master of Liddington, and you should have been, never fear. I would have stood at nothing to bring that about. As it is, I will say good-night."

"Should you like to hear your secret expounded before you go?" said Berkley, quietly, as he picked himself out of his easy chair.

"My secret is my own," replied Miss Hemmings, gazing with some little discomposure at her host.

"No; not altogether, because you have betrayed it. Harold Luxmoore has determined to marry Grace Layton *coute qui coute*, that is to say, in spite of everything. He has made up his mind to forfeit Liddington sooner than risk such another misunderstanding with his bride-elect as that lately cleared up."

The ladies'-maid stared at Berkley in utter bewilderment.

"How could you know?" she murmured. "There was nobody in the room with them but myself, I can swear."

Berkley gave vent to a low laugh as he recognized the accuracy of his deductions.

"I know a good deal, my dear Sarah, and my sources of information are infinite; meanwhile, allow me to present you with this for your expenses," and he thrust a bank-note into her hand. "Pray wrap well up, and mind you don't take cold. Quite right; knot that handkerchief well about your throat, child. Good-night."

"Clever girl," muttered Berkley, gazing into the fire after Miss Hemmings' departure, "but checkmated this time, I fancy."

END OF VOL. II.

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